

on spec

the canadian magazine of the fantastic

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B.C. Holmes

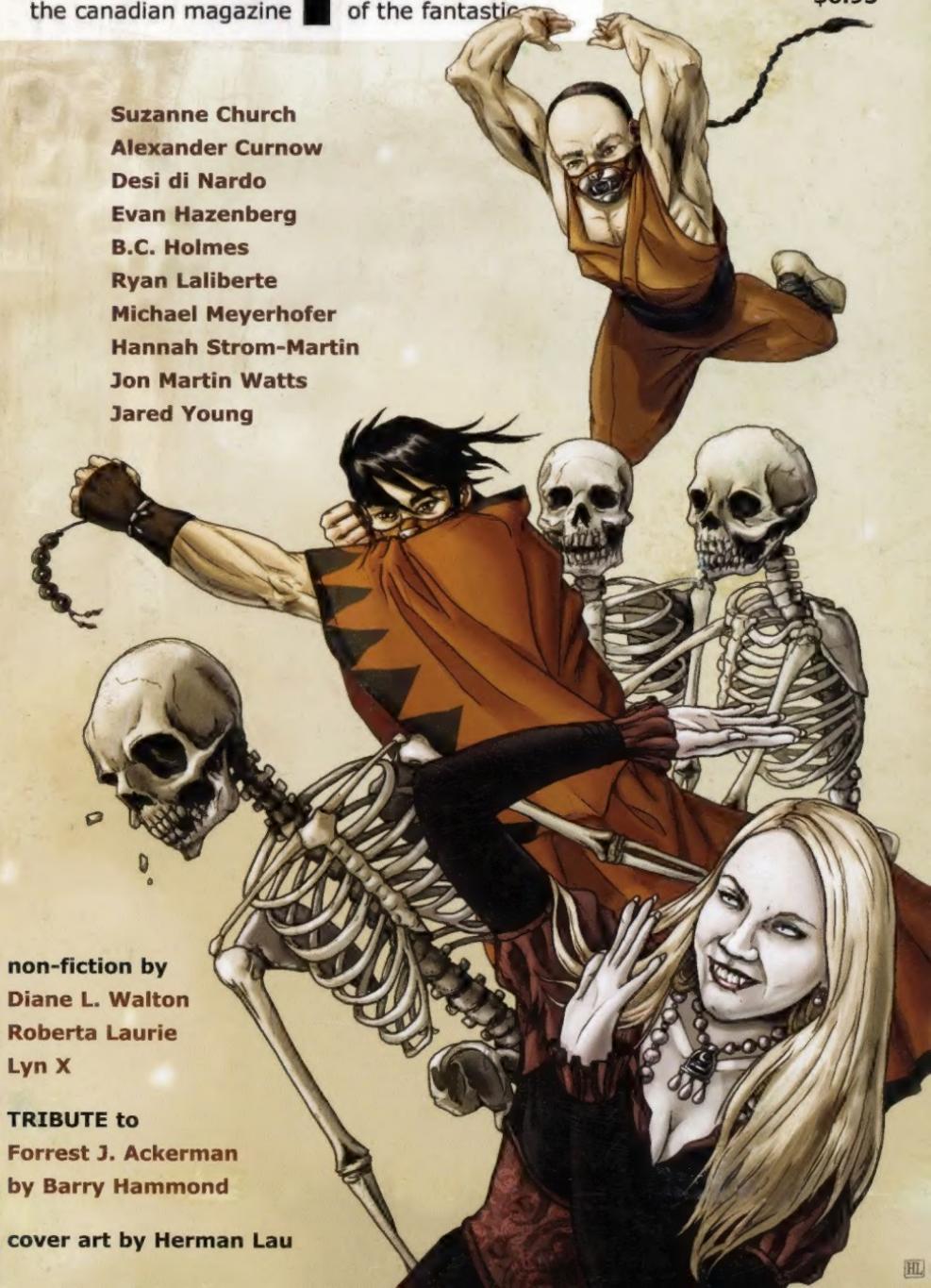
Ryan Laliberte

Michael Meyerhofer

Hannah Strom-Martin

Jon Martin Watts

Jared Young



non-fiction by

Diane L. Walton

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Lyn X

TRIBUTE to

Forrest J. Ackerman

by Barry Hammond

cover art by Herman Lau

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cover

Demonquellers © Herman Lau

Another Fond Farewell... and Welcome!

***On Spec's* interim Publisher's Assistant, Danica LeBlanc, is moving on to (literally) greener pastures in Vancouver. We thank Danica (again) and wish her well on the coast!**

Our Public Relations intern Jennifer Laface will be taking on another new role at *On Spec* by filling the position as Publisher's Assistant—welcome!

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Editors and the Rules of Engagement

Diane L. Walton, Fiction Editor

When we started *On Spec* in Marianne's living room those twenty-odd years ago, I don't think any of us figured it would last longer than a couple of years. We knew a magazine like this was long-overdue in Canada; we knew there'd be a few noses out of joint in Eastern Canada, to see an upstart, inexperienced Alberta-based group do something so outrageous. What we didn't know was what it would be like to be seen, years later, as a Canadian icon!

Now don't get me wrong. None of this has gone to our heads. In my heart, I'm still a geek who can remember episodes of the original "Star Trek". I still go to SF conventions and gaze worshipfully at the guest writers and editors on the stage. I *so* want to be one of them when I grow up.

Well, surprise, surprise. *On Spec* actually grew up! The editorial staff has a few more grey hairs now, and suddenly we find ourselves not watching, but *being* those people up on the stage. Those people that others are watching with envy are... well, they're us!

Who knew? At the World Fantasy Con in Calgary in October, I chaired a panel with fellow SF magazine editors, Jetse de Vries (formerly of *Interzone*), Gordon Van Gelder (*The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction*) and Shawna McCarthy (*Realms of Fantasy*). While we had some obvious differences in the way we conduct business (*On Spec*, for example is the only one receiving government arts agency support), I was amazed and encouraged when the conversation turned to the editorial choices we all made for our respective magazines. We were on the same page there. Each of us—professional and semi-professional—selects the stories that speak to us. We buy stories that strike a chord, and have all the necessary elements to be "right" for our readers.

There is no magic formula here. There's no trend that one can identify, nothing that says "Hey, you should write a vampire story because *On Spec* is buying vampire stories this month!" Sure, I see vampire stories all the

time, but most will simply not be the *right* vampire story for *On Spec*. This is probably because the writer who sits down and says, "Today I am going to write a vampire story," just isn't getting it. On the other hand, there may be a writer out there who says, "I will show the reader a character, tormented by his past, who must right an old wrong, but in the process, he may be hurting the ones who love him. And I'll make him a vampire." Maybe *that* writer is actually getting it.

I won't use this editorial to go into details about the mechanics of writing a good story. There are many places for writers to learn that. Even our own book, *The ABCs of How Not to Write Speculative Fiction* by Susan MacGregor, is a "how NOT to", rather than a "How To" book. We editors live in perpetual hope that someone who sends us a story will get it right. Alistair MacLeod would always tell his creative writing students that if they didn't get their stories right, their readers would be more likely to go to the kitchen, make a cheese sandwich, and not return to the book. The cheese sandwich was the writer's bitter enemy.

At *On Spec*, our mantra is to ensure that our stories will *engage the reader*, because a story that kicks me off the manuscript page will do the same to other readers if we publish it. A story that gently takes my hand or furiously grabs me by the throat and makes me *want to stay* in that world with those characters is a story we will buy and be proud to publish. And because we have several editors—each with his or her own Rules of Engagement—the magazine becomes an eclectic offering of a variety of stories for many tastes.

This never-ending search for a truly engaging short story is what keeps me opening those slush-pile envelopes, rolling up my figurative sleeves and forging ahead. Mind you, there are times when that cheese sandwich is pretty tempting. •

Where We've Been and Where We'll Be

In 2008, *On Spec* editors attended several SF conventions across the North American continent: KeyCon (Winnipeg), WorldCon (Denver), ConCept (Montreal), ConVersion (Calgary), World Fantasy Con (Calgary) and Pure Speculation (Edmonton) were among them. With 2009 comes a long-awaited event—WorldCon in the gorgeous city of Montreal in August. We'll be there, and we'll be at other cons too, so drop by our table and say hello. See the ad in this issue for a link to the Anticipation website. •

**Tribute to
Forrest J. Ackerman
1916 - 2008**

Children Of The Ackermanster

Barry Hammond

I didn't know Forrest J. Ackerman. The sole human contact I ever had with him was for about five minutes on September 5, 1994, at WorldCon in Winnipeg, Manitoba. He was already into his late seventies back then and I was forty-two. Yet, when he died on December 4, 2008, I felt the loss. In some ways, he'd been a bigger influence on my life than the opinions of my own parents.

To understand why, we have to go back in time. Back like H.G. Wells' *The Time Machine*, back like the Antarctic crater world of *The Land Unknown*, back like the figures silhouetted in freeze frame against the elongated oval of the spinning hypnotic wheel of *The Time Tunnel*, back to the pre-Beatle days of surf music, the days of the first skate boards, of weekly westerns like *Rawhide*, *Have Gun Will Travel*, *The Rifleman*, *Wagon Train*, *Wanted: Dead or Alive*, *The Virginian*, and *Bonanza*, positive cop shows like *Dragnet* and *Highway Patrol*, where most entertainment was in black and white, the images were dominated by the sweating, pock-marked faces of intense New York method actors, the post-war, cold-war Eisenhower paranoia of nuclear fear as portrayed in movies like *Fail-Safe*, *Dr. Strangelove*, *Seconds*, *The Spy Who Came In From The Cold*,

or the first season of *The Outer Limits*, where the soundtrack of life was the *Peter Gunn* theme and *Telstar*, the smells were dominated by the tins of the Humbrol enamel I used to paint my monster models and Weird-Ohs, and Ed "Big Daddy" Roth, *Johnny Staccato* and Ed "Kookie" Burns were the coolest dudes on the planet.

At that time, I was an impressionable pre-teen boy, whose parents owned an 8mm movie camera they'd occasionally let him use, whose head was mostly in the clouds, who loved anything to do with monsters, horror and science fiction films and where anything from the exotic worlds of art, movies or any other entertainment seemed far more vivid and interesting than my day-to-day life at school in Edmonton, Alberta, Canada. I used their camera to film three-to-ten-minute backyard epics on such diverse subjects as a Classics Comic book-based version of Guy Du Muppassant's *The Flayed Hand* with fellow school boys playing all the parts, shot in moody bright summer sunshine lighting in period costumes of short-sleeved shirts and Perma-Press pants, a science fiction themed piece where an animated G.I. Joe covered in crepe hair shot death rays from his single eye against a Girder & Panel toy and coloured-pencil background, a *Frankenstein* which featured a Plasticine octopus animated inside my brother's aquarium and myself doing the best Tor Johnson imitation I could muster at ten years of age in a bald skull cap and white flour makeup, or a *Dracula* shot in the castle of my parents' living room with their 1960's curtains being pulled to provide the means of introducing the sunlight for the decomposition scene, which ended in Kayro syrup and red vegetable dye-soaked Kleenex being peeled piece-by-piece in time-lapse from a plastic novelty skull. Steven Spielberg was apparently never in danger of being outstripped by a young filmmaker from the north. These efforts were mostly inspired by articles in a certain magazine.

While others might remember Forrest J. Ackerman for his connection with early fandom, through organizations like Clifton's Cafeteria Science Fiction Club, where he became associated with writers like Ray Bradbury, Robert A. Heinlein, Leigh Brackett and Jack Williamson, or the Los Angeles Science Fiction Fantasy Society, or the National Fantasy Fan Federation, his work as a literary agent representing the likes of Isaac Asimov, Bradbury again, or the future founder of Scientology, L. Ron Hubbard, his own writing (such as his book on Boris Karloff, *The Frankenscience Monster*), or as the producer of *Vampirella*, I knew of him

primarily as an editor, the man behind the magazine *Famous Monsters of Filmland*.

To me, that was the most important magazine ever invented, and if it hadn't already existed, someone else would have had to make it up. Its articles and, especially, its large format black and white photographs were fuel for all the dreams, nightmares, fantasies and ambitions my ten-to-twelve-year-old brain could handle. The magazine cemented my already burgeoning interest in cinema and further fed my total and lasting obsession with figures like Lon Chaney Senior, Boris Karloff, Bela Lugosi, the stop-motion animation of Ray Harryhausen (whose *7th Voyage Of Sinbad* had blown me out of my socks at the age of seven), Jim Danforth and other special effects wizards of the time, the makeup artistry of Jack Pierce, Roy Ashton, or Dick Smith. Most importantly, it showed behind-the-scenes views of the movies and the people who made them. It demonstrated that these fantastic worlds were created not by some distant gods in Hollywood but by ordinary mortals, men and women working day-to-day-if-creative jobs in a commonplace-if-distant city.

One of the things that annoys me most in my old age is to hear this catch-phrase that "there are no more heroes." Bullshit! There are, there always have been, and there always will be. Forrest J. Ackerman was one of my early heroes. So was every writer, artist, painter, sculptor, every actor, director, composer, makeup artist, set designer, cinematographer, musician, singer, or any other creative person that did any film or any other art form I've ever admired. These, along with those who push forward the boundaries of science, medicine and technology, are the things humans can be proud of, not the parasites of politics and economics.

An appreciation of Ackerman written by Robin Rowland, a photo editor for CBC news stated that, "Ackerman was part of a generation of largely American fans and authors who grew up in the early part of the 20th century, a time of technological optimism and faith in progress," and that, "The writing born of that optimism inspired the baby boom generation in all forms of creative endeavour, not only in writing books and producing television and movies but, as many now believe, also in much of the technological innovation we both bless and curse today."

That may be true but I only know that his magazine helped forge lasting interests and ideas that are still propelling me forward, fifty years later. Most basic among those ideas is that you could make a magazine of your interests and use it to both attract like-minded people,

and that it could be both a vehicle and a launching pad for those other people and their ideas.

If I look back on *Famous Monsters of Filmland* today, I see many things in its pages. I see that Ackerman was the first film historian I was to become acquainted with. There were dozens of others later: Carlos Clarens, Richard Schickel, Alain Silver, James Ursini, Arthur Lennig, and many others but, for me, Ackerman was the first. He was also the first memorabilia collector I came across and his house became a sort of film and horror museum, stuffed with posters, photographs, props and costumes from movies that people later came from all over the world to see. He was the first photo-archivist I read about, collecting rare movie stills and backstage making-of pictures. He was even my first contact with fandom, before I knew there was such a thing. And, above all, the first writer/editor to set an example for all those I was to encounter later. From the old back issues, I see that he championed foreign language films, showcasing Spanish, Mexican, even Czechoslovakian films, before that became popular in the art house cinemas of the 1960s.

Even his limitations were interesting. You might find his sense of humour corny, the way he'd label picture captions with headings like, "This singing man from *The Mummy's Curse* (with Lon Chaney Jr.) seems to be saying: 'Ouch, you're squeezing my tonsils too hard. If you don't cut that out, I'll pour water on that dusty old 3000-year-old body of yours and turn you into an instant mud pie!'" but that was Forry's (or The Ackemonster, or 4SJ, or Forjak or any of the other silly names he called himself) sense of humour. As I got older I'd find those captions irritating, wanting him to take things more seriously, but they probably helped popularize and sell the magazine to a wider audience than just horror fans and the articles were more serious, giving behind-the-scenes details you couldn't get anywhere else at that time. Even if the captions were goofy you could tell he loved this stuff. If someone puts their interests and even limitations on display in a social manner, like a magazine, it gives the reader an idea of those boundaries and demonstrates where they can be pushed or exceeded by the next generation or by other groups. It's yet another reason to do it.

The magazine certainly made me want to go back and explore the films in those fascinating old stills—the ones I'd missed, or which were made before I was born—the ones that laid the foundation for what I was seeing at the time, which in turn paved the way for what we're seeing

today. It was a way of connecting with the lineage of things.

Then there's that whole idea behind American magazine culture—that no matter what your interests are there could be a magazine devoted to that subject—an idea I've always found valuable, encouraging and inspiring. Though we've never talked much about it, I suspect my fellow editors at *On Spec* share this view in some form or other. Though there may not have been the specific example of Forrest J. Ackerman to inspire them, there was some figure in their past—maybe another writer, editor, or even a teacher or some other authority figure who let them know things were possible, that you could do something with your life besides just existing.

I'm glad he made a number of appearances in films and documentaries so, when I feel like it, I can still watch him walking, and talking and moving around. Film: it's the only real time machine we're likely to see. I watched him just the other day in *Schlock! The Secret History Of American Movies*, a documentary by Ray Greene about exploitation films. If you're unaware of Ackerman, a Canadian film company, Roadhouse Films, has done a documentary about him, *Famous Monster: Forrest J. Ackerman*, that's been running on the Space Channel and which, hopefully, will be out on DVD soon. Check it out.

When I met Ackerman briefly at Worldcon, he'd stopped by the *On Spec* booth and dealer table and I did the gushing fan boy thing, telling him how I'd read *Famous Monsters* as a boy and had always admired both the magazine and him. He was gracious, showing me Bela Lugosi's Dracula ring, which Lugosi had given to him, and which he'd worn to the convention, probably to break the ice and make conversation with other fans who he knew would appreciate seeing it as much as I did. I'd like to think that, looking at the table and at *On Spec*, he realized that he'd helped pass on his love of Science Fiction, Horror, and Fantasy and that his life had been an example to the generation that came next, even with all the quirks and specific differences that separated the generations. I'd also like to think that, in some small way, we at *On Spec* are doing the same, passing it on to the next generation in some form and that we're all, like some title of the B-movies he loved, *The Children Of The Ackemonster*.

I'm glad he existed and I'm glad I got to meet him, however briefly, and thank him for being who and what he was. •

"More often I had to fix things
that other people unsettled."
He paused for a sip. "Trust me,
people unsettle things."

Every Single Round a Last Call

Ryan Laliberte

"Tell me Lewis," John said after downing his scotch. "Why are you here? What has life got lined up for you outside of this place?"

On the business side of the bar, Lewis slid a lemon wedge over a gin and tonic's glass lip and sighed. He passed the drink to another waiting customer, who slid back money and went to a table. Why couldn't John bug him instead?

John's brief interrogation sessions came often, despite ample hints that Lewis didn't like personal questions. And every question from John felt personal. "I don't have anything lined up now, John," he answered flatly. "You already asked me that once or twice. How about you?"

John threaded fingers through his tousled brown hair and glanced briefly out the wide windows of the establishment. Light from the opposing gas station was distorted by rain massaging the dirty panes, brushing the bar's innards a shimmering blue. That light hit him a little... differently.

"I'm right where I should be." He replied evenly. Either the drink or the fuzz of the rain seemed to be giving him a headache. "I asked you."

Lewis poured again, took the twenty John offered. "Why do you want to know?"

"I ask because you're always here. You and this bar." He seemed genuinely perplexed by that.

"I work here full time." Lewis muttered ambivalently.

"But that's what's different." John stated the dilemma; "Nobody else *always* is. Not even any place *always* is. But you are. And the bar is. Always."

Lewis shrugged. "Seems that way." John only knew that because he was parked there for every hour Lewis worked. It was sad, really.

A month had gone by since the first day John had come, and he was the first customer of every day since. There were so many strange incidents in every shift with John around that Lewis couldn't possibly remember all of them. He had a particular craziness that drink couldn't create, only liberate, and it broke up the bar's monotony in very interesting ways.

Lewis remembered the previous week when John had brought the same ragged newspaper with him for days on end, ink bled by rain. The front page had a political envoy sent to Jordan being fed into the back of a decrepit ambulance under a bold caption: *Single Bullet Ends Peace Talks*.

"Sometimes it misses, but it mostly hits." John had explained, physically distancing himself from the paper every few minutes and then snatching it back up again. "I've been studying this thing and I'm sure there's a pattern."

Lewis didn't get an explanation. Soon it didn't matter. John lost the paper and came up with something new.

John had a game he played where he put his scotch down on random tables and turned his back, marking time on his wristwatch. Sometimes he even asked other patrons to hold his drink for him. A few minutes later he'd turn back to an empty spot and declare that his drink was gone. He'd still pay for it though. In some instances, he even offered to pay for lost drinks he hadn't been given yet to lose. It was only when John turned back to a woman who'd kindly participated in one experiment and actually screamed at the sight of her that the bar's owner, Reggie became involved. She was Reggie's girlfriend, she'd been close to petrified and John found himself on the street.

When he stubbornly returned the next day, Reggie said nothing. He'd found out from Lewis the astronomical amount of money the nutcase was spending and that squared everything. Unofficially, the seat at bar center was John's; his laboratory for inexplicable madness, and a perch from which he could interrogate Lewis.

In the present, John gathered his thoughts out from under the alcoholic wool and ran his finger across the ashen bar as he spoke, like

he was tracing an idea.

"The thing is Lewis, you remember most of the things I've said and done, even though it's probably senseless to you. But your bosses wouldn't. Nor would any of the other people in here. A lot of these people here tonight are seeing me for the first time, even though I've been a regular here more than a month and so have they." John turned to an empty table that had been robbed of its chairs by another table's cluster of collegiates, and studied empty space. "Unless they haven't been."

Though the pluralizing of 'boss' was a curious thing, Lewis didn't comment.

John abruptly changed tracks. "What was I talking about yesterday? Try your hardest to remember, and tell me."

Lewis thought. "Playing high stakes poker. You had a theory that you could take a house in just one hand if you could slow a game down to an hour per hand. Then you said something about park vacations."

John laughed, impressed. "Perfect memory! And that's free particle variation. Fun topic. But that idea was worthless. The cards could spin on me the second they left my hand. They've got to be in direct physical contact. That seems to be the rules anyway." He frowned uncertainly.

"You some kind of scientist?" Lewis asked, wondering if he was solving the riddle of John's green pockets.

"Not really. Not unless you think knowing what a car's engine does makes you a mechanic. But about the cards thing, how the hell do you remember my saying that?"

Lewis pretended to constipate himself with thought. "Because, you told me John. You tell me lots of things."

John gave him a level stare. "I'm serious. You don't respond to the other changes around you. Your boss is always your boss regardless of who that happens to be. Yet you remember selections of what I say to the last detail, even weeks later. I can't get that reasoned out. Not you. Not this bar."

Lewis had previously entertained theories that John prepped for bottle climbing with a little something extra outside, but no introspective substance lasted all day. This was just John plus alcohol. Wow.

"Another." John said, breathing dry fumes.

Lewis' boss, Angela, heard him and motioned for his glass. John was staring at the bar-top, gathering his thoughts as she poured and passed it over. "Eleven fifty." Angela said.

John gave Angela a kind of double take appropriate for mermaid

sightings. He held her gaze for an instant and turned around. He studied the bar, examined the ceiling fan, assessed the small clusters of patrons from his stool, scuffed his feet on the peanut shells and then turned back. He saw Lewis still standing there with her, sighed reluctantly with a strange relief. "I could have sworn I felt that happen. I think I always do."

Angela and Lewis traded looks.

"Yet again my point gets proven, and no way to prove it to you. Two." John turned to Angela. "Keep a total please, uh..."

"An-ge-la." She supplied by the syllable, laughing and shaking her head. "We're going to cut ourselves off when we feel we've had enough, aren't we John?" An elbow told Lewis to play sentry on that suggestion.

John didn't notice. He looked at Angela with warm embarrassment, and Lewis realized the man couldn't actually remember who she was.

"I'll pay at closing time, just this once." John said sweetly. Angela smiled back and moved down the bar to serve another ripe customer who was playing his empty pint glass with a spoon.

John stared at nothing for a moment as Lewis trudged around the bar to sweep. John grabbed his arm as he passed. "Really quickly, humour me. What annoying thing did I do that time the boss's girlfriend was here? You remember don't you?"

He seemed embarrassed to be asking that question, even though Lewis knew it was complete senseless. "The boss doesn't have any other girls working here. Ron and I are it."

"No, not working here. I said girlfriend. You know?"

"Angela is straight, John." Lewis went to brush John's hand away, but the grip tightened.

"And poker? Was that a stupid idea I had?" He was desperate for an answer.

"Nobody wins at cards by deciding to, John. I don't care what kind of nuclear physics crap they think they know. Let go of me before Angela sees you and has Ron bounce you. I've got things to do."

John let go. Lewis swept, cleaned tables and took more orders. Things went back to normal for a bit. Lewis resumed his post at the bar and put soda over gin for another customer.

John sat there quietly. "It happened again." He confided.

"What?" Lewis asked.

"Another change. She wasn't here before."

"She showed up late tonight." Lewis shook his head. "It's her bar,

so she's not gonna get docked, you know?"

"No, Lewis." John said anxiously. "She never owned this." He ran his hand over his forehead and put his drink down solidly, coming to a decision.

"I've waited too long. Its time I leveled with you." He said gravely.

"Okay" Lewis replied. Hopefully, this would be interesting.

John dug out his wallet, removed a laminated card and dropped it on the bar. It was blue-bordered with typed info. "A birth certificate," he announced. "My birth certificate."

Lewis looked down. Born in Mississauga, Ontario, parents named William and Beverly Granger. Dates, numbers, other stuff. "John Granger." Lewis said, almost in greeting.

"It's not real." John supplied. "Not anymore."

"Alright."

"My Mother exists, yes. At least she did when I checked her out. She's married, successful, has kids, but my Dad doesn't. He died in a chemical leak in a plant in Windsor, Canada in July of oh-nine. They never met." He let that sink in. "I don't exist."

The door opened and a loudly chattering couple entered, bringing in the April sun's unseasonably pounding heat. Everyone had been complaining about that heat all day. Lewis ignored them. "How so?"

John swirled his dregs, and found the words. "I was a time traveller."

He let the statement hang there for a minute, and fidgeted with his hands. There was a quiet plea hanging there. Do not mock me, his gaze begged.

Lewis poured himself some water, intrigued despite himself. "Time traveller?"

"Yes. From the year twenty seventy-four." John rubbed at his forehead, relieved Lewis was listening. "That's what I did for a living."

"Don't you mean will do?"

"No, did. Seeing chronology as relative to the self in general is supposed to stave off nuttiness." His brows lifted in reluctant admission of irony.

Lewis grinned, interested in where this was going. A new chapter in the book of John. "So what kind of time-travelling did you do?"

John steeped his hands, looking inward. "I was a historian, fancy that, sent back to observe, record findings and come back without moving a single blade of grass out of place. More often, I had to fix things that other people unsettled." He paused for a sip. "Trust me,

people unsettle things."

"I can imagine." Lewis muttered.

John nodded. "I mostly did maintenance in the mid-twentieth through mid twenty-first century, and became eye witness to quite a few big events. When the Kent State massacre happened, I was there. Electrocution of the Rosenburgs, Cuban Crisis, tanks in Montreal. I even witnessed the re-assassination of JFK. I don't need to worry about explaining what that means, because it technically didn't happen anyway. More of an anecdote now."

"Fine."

"Nine-eleven, Hurricane Katrina. Most of the bad stuff happens around the bad stuff if you know what I mean."

"Did you get to see the Berlin wall go down?" Lewis asked. "Or The World Wars or the Beatles breaking up or anything?"

"No. We couldn't travel out of North America. We had to stay near the transit lab. That's in a limestone cave in Illinois that no human being had ever seen before we set up shop. You arrive in the same volume of space you leave from, and it has to be empty when you get there. Unfortunately, there aren't many spaces in the world that haven't been occupied by someone at some point. Probes sent back prove that the cave was just such a place."

"Oh." Lewis was impressed. John had really thought this through, either before or during his fall from sobriety. He'd heard of elaborate imaginary worlds that some crazies inhabited and this one seemed benign enough. Still, the whole story wasn't there.

"So what brings you to this year then? And why don't you, uh, exist in it?" Lewis asked clinically.

John regarded Lewis for a moment, coming unfocused as he muttered shamefully, "Stupidity."

He took his last sip and put his glass down. Lewis lifted the scotch, but John covered the glass with his hand and shook his head before continuing. Lewis set the scotch down slowly and listened.

"We had data regarding an event shift. Basically, to check if some part of recorded history is altered, you compare records kept in a temporal stasis field with copies that aren't isolated. When any two things don't match, which our systems check constantly, it means history's been changed. When history changes, records change, but not records in the isolation matrix because they're out of the loop and can't be."

Lewis looked pained.

John elaborated. "If it says you took off your left shoe first last Sunday in the sealed records, it better say the same thing in other records, or we show up to deal with you and your shoes, got it? Every little change can screw up something greater."

Lewis seemed to understand. John went on. "We had to go to Windsor, Ontario on January twenty-second, two thousand nine."

"Less than two months ago," Lewis supplied.

John sighed. "We had to figure a shift out. In the sealed records, a chemical plant in Canada suffered an explosion that took fifteen lives. In the real world, the event changed. That plant suffered only a gas leak with just two injuries. Somebody interfered, however subtly, and stopped the explosion. That put fifteen people into the world who weren't supposed to exist from then onward. I've already told you that we make mistakes, despite our best efforts."

"Yeah, I remember."

John looked at his glass. "I'm the first person to have done it deliberately."

A clattering sound froze John in his stool.

Jason was personally dealing with a big order at table seven. Six North Alliance soldiers had parked their rifles in a picket fence against a table and the waitress, Darlene nearly tripped on one in passing. One of the younger soldiers snickered. John blinked at the loud sound they made and slowly turned.

Outside, low thuds were carried over by the still air. A departing customer let a flash of distant light in past him, followed by rolling cracks of distant mortar shells. John surveyed his surroundings with reluctance before turning back to the bar, visibly shaken.

Lewis watched him, wondering if the soldiers were giving him the shakes. Considering how they dealt with civilians, some people left the bar when Militias merely showed up. The boss, Jason had to tolerate them since they charged his bar a lot less than the rest of the block for zone protection, which was interesting since the front line was nowhere near here. The militia certainly seemed more interested in protecting the whiskey list than any book store or hairdresser.

John was showing the rapt attention of someone who'd just seen a horrific traffic accident.

"What is it?" Lewis asked.

"It's because of me that these things keep happening." John said, short of breath. "I can't ever see them coming. I just want to think I can." He looked into Lewis's eyes for some form of comfort, and even though Lewis had nothing to offer, John anchored himself in his gaze, calming down.

"They've been here for over an hour John."

John winced and shook his head. "I did this. I caused it. Everything is constantly changing because of me, all the time and I can't keep it together anymore." His eyes moistened and his voice dropped under the abruptness of a sob. He fought for control and kept talking, slow and measured word for word. "Do you remember the factory?"

"You were telling me about the factory. Yes John, I remember," Lewis assured him. Just try to relax."

"Thank you. I really didn't want to start all that from scratch." John winced happily. "The factory, yes. I saw my father's name on the work list, his real, original birth name. The name on my birth certificate was something he changed it to. When I was sixteen, and got into trouble of my own, he confided that to me. His troubles had once been so bad, he'd dropped his old life altogether. He changed his name, poured out all the booze, and married my mother. He didn't tell me everything, but he told me enough.

"I should have realized what was happening when I saw it. In the adjusted record he was injured with one other and the explosion never happened. But that's not the way it was supposed to be. Others were supposed to die and he was supposed to be fine."

A siren kicked on, and a vehicle blew past outside, washing everything blue and red before fading towards the dull thudding.

John ignored it with an effort. "If I'd been thinking, I would have told my superiors what happened, turned it over to someone else. They would have acted rationally, carefully. But when its family Lewis, you don't think clearly. I needed to make sure my father survived when we fixed it."

Pyrotechnic light from outside washed John in a sickly orange as he continued speaking.

"I caused the records to change by pulling my father out of there before he could cause that explosion with a smuggled-in cigarette dropped on a leaking chemical line two floors below him. He reeked with booze, and wasn't the dad I'd someday know and love. I got him out of there, posing as some random emergency worker, but the gas

was still leaking. And my father was as stupid as I had been, just as desperate to help others as I had been to help him, regardless of the cost. He got away from me and rushed in to help his friend on the bottom floor, right at the leak point. I had delayed him, and the gas had gotten thicker. Just a few breaths killed him."

Lewis stopped cleaning glasses and allowed John a minute. He seemed like he might sob again, but just kept talking.

"Just like that, everything was different. My team was gone. After a few days, I managed to get back to the cave, but my recall device didn't work. The project was either halted, or moved, or never happened. I was lost, stranded."

John's gaze left Lewis and went to the bottles lined up behind him, backed by a mirror that doubled them in perfect order. "It took a while to really piece things together. Two stupid people, sixty-five years apart ending their own lives at the same time with best intentions. That's just another anecdote now."

Mortar thuds, the coarse laugh of patrons and knocking pints filled the vast empty silence between them. Lewis didn't know what to say, and they both stayed quiet for a time.

Then John looked at Lewis, carefully sizing him up. "But that's not the end of the story, is it?"

Lewis sensed the change in demeanor and frowned. "I don't know, you tell me."

"It's your turn, Lewis. Tell me your story."

"What story? I don't get to travel through time. I pour drinks and wash dishes. I have no story." Lewis slid his hands across the bar in a vast work-encompassing shrug.

John nodded very slowly, putting a puzzle piece where he felt it needed to go. "You know something? That's it. That's the solution. You're exactly right."

Lewis looked at him. "Solution to what?"

The emotional drain had solidified John's expression into something cold. "I really thought hell would be lonely, Lewis. But you're here with me. Why is that?"

"I don't know what you mean. With you where? In a bar? Is this where non-existent time travelers go or something? You're not making a whole lot of sense."

John's hand gripped the empty glass. With ice in it, it sweated like

John did. "Let me be a little clearer. My father's death at that plant at that moment didn't unmake me. I wasn't in my own time and place where that could happen. I was out of the line of falling dominos. Instead, it unhooked me, divorced me from every temporal anchor-point in the universe."

Lewis said nothing. He just listened.

"I have no reality of my own, so I'm being shoved through all of them, one at a time, getting rejection after rejection. It's a philosophical concept at work, as much as scientific. Everybody has a designation in all possible realities, Lewis. We exist as a plumber, or a dictator, or a movie star. The only thing for certain is that each person is something, unless they are like me and they've wiped themselves off the slate. That's my hell. Reality re-forms over and over again around me. It's happened no less than twice tonight. It probably happens every second, but in little ways that aren't noticed because they don't affect me directly. That gas station across the street might not exist right now, and I wouldn't know with my head turned."

There was no station across the street. The video store had been torn down years ago. Lewis kept silent.

"After weeks of wandering and sleeping, I discovered that most spaces only remain for as long as I touch them. A burger gets eaten while I hold it. A motel bed won't vanish under me because something else can't occupy the space I'm in. The universe has many laws for negotiating anomalies that the science I grew up with had barely begun to scratch the surface of. But..."

John stopped, stood up off his stool and locked eyes with Lewis. "I come here and leave here every day Lewis. This bar is always here when I come back and so are you. Sometimes the paint is different and the bosses and other staff change like haircuts, but Lewis the bartender is always serving me. Tell me Lewis. Why is that? How can you be doing this job in every possible reality that I visit? What keeps you here?"

Lewis blinked, taken aback. He'd entertained this story out of sympathy and a little interest, but suddenly things were turning in a personal, nasty direction.

What was John trying to say? That Lewis was some kind of loser? He remembered confessing to John during one of his interrogations that he'd tended this bar for over ten years. He'd said that every day was more and more of the same, and that he sometimes wanted more.

That had been a confession born from one moment of ennui: an admission that life wasn't perfect. Everybody had moments like that. Lewis remembered that day, the day on which John actually shut up for awhile, thinking quietly and carefully. Now Lewis knew why. John never wanted to connect with his bartender. He wanted to break his life down, to judge him. He wanted to negate him. And his stupid time travel nonsense, complete with dead daddy issues to bring in sympathy, had given him a perversely creative method.

What in Lewis' life was any of John's business? He was just a cruel drunk living in a fantasy. His money obviously didn't provide him enough comfort.

John's money. Lewis leaned forward with a sneer, pillaring himself on spread arms.

"Okay mister time traveler, if you're stranded and alone, where is all the money coming from to buy—"

"Quit diverting, Lewis!" John spat. Nearby patrons were turning their heads. "There are safe-funds for stranded travelers that have been building interest since 1910. I drained an account while it was still in existence. They come and go, unlike you. So let's talk about you. Why are you pouring booze with no other possible outcome? How are you so glued to one miserable spot that you actually glue the spot down with you?"

"Screw you!" Lewis stammered, bringing the whole bar to attention, mostly campus kids and old couples. He swelled with a hot blush of embarrassment, but felt much more than that. He felt unmitigated, surprising anger. All eyes were on him for just a moment. He had the whole boozing world at attention. But he felt sudden shame, a helpless feeling of emotional diminishment. He had no retort for John, None. He just wanted everyone to look elsewhere, wanted to be unseen. Negated.

For a pinprick of a painful moment, John's accusation was the truth.

Ten years in this bar. Ten years of muttered dreams fizzled at his lips, forgotten and dispossessed. Ten years of abuse and poor pay and mistaken drinks returned with spit and curses from people who didn't even care to know his name. John knew him very well. John had worked hard to find Lewis' hurt, and he'd cut very deeply to get to it.

Lewis hit back with a stammer. "I wanted to go to college and get an education, but what money I had was stolen years ago, all four thousand of it in a break in! I had a future, but thieves took it!"

John shook his head, disgusted. "Great Lewis, that's heartfelt! And

if I ask in five minutes, what will you say then? My parents were drug addicts? Angela, or whoever, charged me training fees? If I ask you tomorrow, will it be a high-maintenance relationship?"

The bar was growing silent, and John's voice fell as he whispered very carefully so only Lewis could hear. "Quit lying to everybody Lewis. I told you the truth about me. Tell you the truth about you. This is your only post in existence. The universe itself can't decide to make that happen. The only reason is you. You are scared as hell of changing your life even though it changes around you constantly. I know, and I'm the only one who can ever know, that you have no other life to live, and that can only be your fault."

The pint glass in Lewis' hand was a cold weight he wanted to break over John's smug face. He just couldn't leave Lewis alone, couldn't understand his problems. Of course he wanted to be elsewhere. The world was full of people who wanted to be elsewhere. But the sting of failure was too costly, too painful. In those moments when his hopes and dreams surfaced from under the monotony, the vacant feeling from that lack of accomplishment would gut him, and he wished the world were a solid object he could run into at full speed, cracking it apart at its seams. He had so much potential, but the impotent feeling was a wall that stifled and smothered him. So the dreams kept fizzling.

Lewis opened his mouth to retort, but he could only gasp. Instead, he motioned for the boss. Reginald rose from his perch, grabbed John firmly with both hands, and put him out. John didn't struggle or blink or react in anyway, except to hold Lewis's gaze till the last possible second.

Two days went by, and Lewis was sure he would never see John again. Then he came. Evening rays poking through the old stained glass gracefully painted John's sallow features as he came in, took his stool at the bar, and folded his hands on the stippled rubber.

"You've done some nice things with the place." John said conversationally.

Lewis took out a glass, and didn't look at John as he placed it down and reached for the scotch. A stack of money, as thick as wide and bound by a paper bank slip, landed between them.

"Count that Lewis. Get a rough estimate."

Lewis froze, putting down the scotch slowly. His fingers moved to the bills, crowned by a hundred, and counted them without lifting. He

got to about eleven thousand before he stopped, not halfway through.

John coughed. "I came one last time Lewis, to make a deal with you. I know you hate my guts after the other day, and I guess I can't blame you. I've come to change things."

Lewis looked up into John's passive gaze. A soul was being laid bare. Something was peacefully being accepted. Lewis felt a chill.

"I earned my place at this bar Lewis, but you could have so much more. It makes me feel worse about things to have you stuck here with me."

John reached back out and pushed the stack over. "So I will leave here in three hours and I won't come back. Before I leave, you will leave, never to come back. The first one of us to leave takes this money. It's enough for a few years of college, a down payment on a house—use your imagination. It can get you many things you will never, ever find here." John gave Lewis a moment to react, but Lewis was rooted to the spot, disbelieving.

"I'm nobody's angel Lewis. This money doesn't exist except for me to drink away. I've given up hope that the agency could track this money to here and retrieve me somehow. Every withdrawal pulls from a different reality, painted X's on a desert island that only exists for seconds. It's useless. I guess I'll just travel and enjoy the changing scenery. That is, if you're not going to."

John picked up a paper napkin and concealed the money under it. He tapped the glass. "Get me started."

Lewis felt heavy at that moment, like the center of him would fall out on the floor and break. He had no idea what he would do with that money. He hadn't dreamed of so much as owning a car in years. College beckoned, but hadn't happened. His love of numbers, the sciences of nature, had belonged to a different person with loving parents and a home and ideas for brighter tomorrows. The parents had split, the home had shattered and the books had all gone away. Lewis found a job that paid for the essentials of life, and his magazines, and his many failed relationships. He had become sedate, and told himself he was satisfied. And lied.

An hour went by, and so did many faces. John ignored everything, Lewis included and drank with eyes closed. Lewis tended to the bar and the regulars, and fought and wrestled so hard with himself that he admired his own outward composure. He seemed as he usually did, glacial and calm. In the middle of the third hour, he asked Timothy in

the kitchen to put the soup on simmer for a minute and cover the bar.

Lewis phoned Mr. Phelps, his boss for the last ten years. The exchange was short, to the point and emotionless. Lewis couldn't believe that Mr. Phelps didn't care that he was leaving, after so much time. There was the barest of well-wishes, and then Mr. Phelps went back to putting on the links. Lewis realized that other people had walked off this job countless times, but couldn't remember a single one of their names. And why would he? He would be envying their freedom.

John was waiting for him; eyes still closed after all this time, just listening. He'd heard the muffled voices, and wore a smile so sad that Lewis couldn't resist putting a hand on John's arm. John took the napkin off the money with his other hand. Lewis took it. He let John go, wished Timothy well, walked out from behind the bar, and out into the warm light outside.

More time went by, and John ordered another. A stranger fetched his scotch.

In the corner of the bar, having seen it all just as I remembered, I rose.

I passed the tables and booths with their chattering occupants, and took a stool next to John. There was little time, and I'd come too far after so many years to delay things with small talk. John ignored me and everything but his drink, settling in, right up to the point when I reached out and touched his shoulder. Equally dis-corporated fields intersected and we buzzed with invisible static. He almost dropped his glass. "Surprise," I said.

John turned and saw me, my face lined with age and my hair whispering back. My tailored period clothing was immaculate and pressed, all the best when meeting old friends.

His brow furrowed, as he studied me. Recognition came slowly and sweetly. "Lewis?"

"Hello again, John." I took the stool next to his. "It's been awhile. Sixty-five years is long to wait when you can't fix a mistake before it's made. That mistake, as it were, put me through two PhDs and quite a few years of laboratory analysis before we figured out exactly how to connect with your drift. Trillions of realities, but you were in this one for at least another fifteen minutes. I knew that for certain."

John just sat there; his mouth gaped. As things began to resolve, he blinked at tears that got away. They came one after the other and

shone on his face. I knew he had settled down to end things here all this time ago. I had left behind a resigned man. "I can go back?" John asked.

"Yes, assuming we get to the mobile gate soon enough. It's close." I dropped a twenty on the bar and told Timothy to keep the change and make sure that soup didn't burn. The double-take he gave me was a worthy bonus on this trip.

John rose on slurry feet and we left my bar for the last time ever in this particular history. Its stories belonged to countless others, and none of them would be lost.

I started telling John about the wondrous new possibilities of alternate historical analysis, new ground he'd broken himself with his accident. We could find paths to every potential facet of every event without having to meddle in them: total chaos spied through a safe window. He listened in a daze, and nodded, smiling like a kid. "And you'll be working with me on this personally John." I promised. "You owe the Agency about two months worth of recreational spending."

As our voices faded, I didn't see the young Lewis Tanner return to the bar to thank his friend for all he'd done, see the empty stool through the bar's dusty windows and wander off to start a life. •



You're here because
you love the arts...

So are we.

All her life she has been told to believe in demons, has been told they are hideous things, burnt and twisted with sin. The demon in the garden is anything but hideous.

Taming the Beast

Hannah Strom-Martin

“The beast is in all of us,” the priest says.

“Indeed.” Nari is tired of hearing him. It has been nothing but “beast this” and “beast that” the whole week leading up to Bajan Cor. She wonders, walking through the great stone arch, how anyone entering here can have imagination enough for beasts. The stones of Bajan Cor have been scrubbed to stark white purity. Silence lingers about it in slow, heavy clouds. It is a place for priests and virgins. Or virgins who think there is a beast inside them. Nari does not.

“Where are the servants?” she asks. She and the priest stand in the small, colourless kitchen. There are jars for grain and bean flour. No mangoes. No honey.

According to the priest, there will be no servants either. Nari is only vaguely annoyed. Her concern is not for souls to wait upon her, but for people to talk to. People, however, are another thing not to be found in Bajan Cor. Indeed, as the priest leaves, he reminds Nari of her sacred vow: for the next week, until she opens her mouth to speak her wedding vows to a man she has never met, she must be silent.

“I know,” she says. The priest scowls. Apparently the silence has begun. As Nari stands beneath the arch (the iron gate is down now and locked from without), watching the priest turn into a speck of

brown on the dust-blown street, there is only the creak of metal and the irritable flap of the ceaseless summer wind.

I suppose I'm alone with the beast, she thinks. And smiles with the sweetness of a lemon.

• • •

Bajan Cor sits on the fringe of the great desert, an island of reprieve in the cruel heat of the Raga. In a land of demons, succubi and mad sorcerer kings, purity is as valued as water. The days are hot and long, the smell of spices float bitter and sweet through the market stalls of the great corrupt cities. Who would not wish to see a maid in white pass through these stalls, bringing gentleness, refinement? Life is so changeable here. The man who crosses the Raga in high summer may start his journey as one creature and reach his destination as quite another.

The prince plans to reach the other side as himself, for all the good it will do him. He does not believe he is ready to marry but his family has assured him he is. On the same day that the priest interts Nari in her white, pure prison, the prince, also in white, mounts a black horse and begins the long trek from one scorching point to the other. He wonders distantly why he should bow to such outdated modes of courtship. Peasants, after all, marry for love. The name of Nari sounds ephemeral in the back of his head: something hardly to be believed, much less held in the hand at the end of a baking, blackening quest. He cannot be sure he will even like her. Love as a concept is ephemeral, too.

We are creatures of tradition, he thinks, the first hot gust blowing in his face (the wind has turned down-country, as though the sand demons already know of his coming). *Why do we hold to it? What does it profit us, in the end, but sunburn?*

These are important questions but they will have to wait. First comes survival.

And demons.

• • •

They emerge at night, their howls stealing up through the tops of the fan trees. The first night Nari believes them jackals. Then the hooting

begins: a sound both human and animal. The demons send enticing scents up over the walls: aromas they have collected on their many travels. Nari, refusing to stay in bed despite remembered threats of damnation, is out scrounging in the forbidden herb bed when the howling begins.

Should I be scared? she wonders. Her throat opens around its promised silence, wishing to make some statement to signify that she can hear them. A thin rasp comes out and she crouches, petulant, in the dirt. This, she imagines, is what happens when you become married. Your words dry up and become your husband's words. You follow him: white and pure and silent, as though you had died at Bajan Cor and been reborn as its human specter.

The next day she sees her first demon.

She is sitting by the window when it happens. Really, she should be praying, but it is hot out and all she can think of is mango ice. The scroll she found in the library has long since given up any pretense of logic—something about duty and fortitude in the face of temptation—and as she pushes it away she turns to look out over the garden. The demon is standing by the bench, very tall and very dark, as if he has stolen the night to wrap about his shoulders. He is a wolf on two legs, his arms long and his fingers tipped with claws. A beast.

Nari knows she should be frightened. She isn't. Not really. All her life she has been told to believe in demons, has been told they are hideous things, burnt and twisted with sin. The demon in the garden is anything but hideous. Sleek, is how she would describe him. Lupine.

She looks at the demon and the demon looks back. She wonders how it can stand Bajan Cor—the animus of everything it represents.

When several moments have passed she sighs and breaks her vow.
“What are you doing here?” she asks.

The demon makes a panting sound and smiles a wolfish smile.
“I have come to gaze upon my bride.”

“Who is your bride?”

“Look in a mirror and you will see.”

Nari gives a snort. “Don't be tiresome.” She has heard demons act this way. The only thing that keeps her from laughing outright is the unnerving look of hunger on the demon's face.

“Will you come and walk with me in the garden?” the demon asks.
“No.”

"Why not?"

"Princesses don't walk with demons."

"Some of the best demons I know were princesses, once."

"Oh?" The idea is amusing. She speaks before she can think about it.

"Of course," the demon says. "Now they aren't princesses anymore, but queens with worlds of their own."

"Who would want to rule a world of demons?"

"Who can be happy behind stone walls?"

Nari opens her mouth but she can't think of a retort for that one. She scowls and the demon laughs.

"Come walk in the garden with me, beautiful girl."

"I can't."

"Why?"

"It isn't... proper."

"When you are a demon you will not care about propriety."

"Who says I'm going to be a demon?"

The demon makes its panting sound again but says nothing.

"You have stood too long in the sun, demon," Nari says. "Go away."

"Very well. But I will come again. You will invite me."

"No, I won't," Nari says, but the demon is already gone. His shadow, absent a body, crouches on the paving stones for a moment, then leaps up and flies over the garden wall like a bird.

• • •

That night she dreams of her husband. His hair is as long as hers, curtaining her as he leans over. When he moves there is a smell of musk. When he speaks his voice tumbles down upon her with a ringing of crystal bells.

She wakes, her heart going fast. The bells of her dream ring out through the night and become laughter. As the trees beyond her window begin to shake with the movement of beasts, she draws her heavy curtains and falls back to bed with her fingers in her ears. Now the chamber is hot as well as lonesome, but until she dreams of him again a few hours later, Nari is convinced this will drive all thoughts of her demon husband from her mind.

• • •

"Pleasant night?" the demon asks. He is perched on the garden wall, a blurred shape of deepest black.

Nari pretends engrossment in another scroll.

"Ah," the demon says. "Very pleasant. There can be more, you know."

"No," Nari mutters, "there can't."

"Surely the man who brings you such pleasant visions deserves a small turn round the garden?"

"You aren't a man."

"Are men so laudable? You don't want to marry the one they've picked for you."

"How—oh, never mind. You're a demon."

"So are you. Don't act so surprised. I've no interest in mortals—except to lead them into sinkholes. You're different. You don't like their rules."

"That doesn't make me a demon."

"Really? What is a demon but one who rejects rules?"

"I don't."

"Walk in the garden with me."

"No. Not liking the rules isn't the same as defying them."

"Walk with me in the garden and I will prove you wrong. There is no in-between, beautiful girl. You are either mortal or demon. Good or bad. Pure or—" he smiles, "impure."

Nari snorts and turns her back.

"Now, demon, you sound just like my parents!"

• • •

They told him becoming a man would be hard, but when the prince arrives early at Bajan Cor he is flabbergasted.

"In there?" he says, faintly.

"Hardly seems worth it, does it?" his demon asks. She is sitting behind him, sidesaddle on his horse—and has been since the last oasis—a beautiful naked woman. The prince avoids looking at her.

He looks instead at the cyclone around Bajan Cor. The great dome appears at random intervals beyond walls of churning sand. Dark shapes prowl just out of range of the tempest. More demons.

The prince, his handsome face somewhat tarnished from his long ordeal, slides from his horse and walks forward as though simply doing

so will banish the spell.

"This is ridiculous!" he announces to no one in particular. "I don't even know what the girl looks like!"

"But love," the demon mocks him, "you must enter. You must rise above the deeds of your father and of all the fathers before him."

"The hell with that!"

"Hell is far better."

"Shut up."

"Why? You know it's true. Only humans create these silly tests for themselves. Compared with what you must face, hell is a paradise."

"I won't turn demon."

"Then you must face the sands and be a man."

The prince stands between his demon and the cyclone, wishing for water and an end to peril. The demon laughs, her presence like fingers searching for loose threads in a knot. In front of him lies duty and a girl he has never met. Behind him is shame—and beauty like a hammer blow.

"There must be another way," he whispers.

• • •

"Your husband is here," Nari's mother says. She and Nari's father have come to supervise the fitting of Nari's wedding gown. The priest has come with them. He uses his magic to bind Nari's voice so she will speak through him. Keeping one's vow of silence is a sacred duty.

"Where is he?" Nari asks. She has avoided talking most of the visit, her skin prickling when her words issue from the priest's mouth.

"By the fan trees," her mother replies. "No. Higher, I think. We can't have the bride tripping on her hem."

"Is his family with him?"

"He is alone, darling."

"What?"

"Everyone has to pass their own tests."

"Oh. So he has a test too. Let me guess: to keep vigil in Boring Cor, eating only rats and drinking only sand."

"Nari," her mother says mildly, "you'll ruin your hemline jerking like that."

"What test must he pass?"

"A test of fire, then of wind. He must cross a certain stretch of desert and battle a cyclone only he can see."

"Can we switch?"

"Switch what?"

"Can we switch tests? I'd much rather have a case of sand-rash."

"Who has taught you to speak this way, child? Surely not I."

"I taught myself."

"Sounds more like a demon to me," her father says. He has worn a scowl from the moment he set foot on the threshold. He keeps squinting at Nari as if he expects her to grow a tail.

"What would you know of demons?" Nari asks tartly.

"That one must face them."

"Yes, yes."

"I did," Nari's mother yawns. "One, anyway. His name was Asmo." A wistful smile appears on her face.

"Yes," Nari's father says. "You have to name them. That's how you get them in your power."

Nari goes very still.

"You mean, you know how to make them go away?"

"Of course."

"You knew beforehand and you didn't tell me?"

"No one is ever told. Not unless they haven't made the effort in a timely manner." His look of suspicion grows.

Nari realizes she is biting the insides of her cheeks and forces herself to stop. The dressing stool goes sliding as she steps down, her anger filling her like a cup of tea slowly poured. For a moment she gives her parents what she hopes is a cutting glare. Then, with feigned calm, she marches toward the priest and stomps upon his sandaled foot. He utters a cry of pain and loses his rigid concentration. Their magical connection shatters. He hops towards the corner, holding his foot, and Nari rounds on her parents with a voice only slightly more controlled.

"How dare you!" she cries. "What have I done for you to leave me here this way? I could be eaten or worse—all to meet some stupid man I'll never care about!"

"Everyone must be tested," her mother says. "How else can we trust you are ready to marry?"

"You *raised* me. If you don't trust me by now then you never will!"

From the corner, the priest lets out a moan.

"The beast," he says. "The beast."

Her father turns red as pepper. "I will say who is trustworthy in this family," he shouts. "You will do as you are told!"

"I will *not!*"

Chaos ensues. In a moment Nari has lost her right to bread. Her pretty clothes will be taken away, all reading materials confiscated. Her parents have switched places with the demons: threatening and howling in unknown tongues. No amount of logic will sway them.

This is the only life they know, she thinks, somewhere beyond the yelling. *They never talked to the demons enough to decide if one life was better than another.*

"You will marry who I say or I have no daughter," her father says. They leave then—to give her time to think. Yet what is there to think about? They have made their choice: tradition over daughter, ceremony over love. And Nari, alone, cannot see that she has any choice at all.

• • •

A white spear hangs above Nari's bed. It is supposed to lie between lovers (not that Bajan Cor hosts many of these anymore) as a pledge of honor and chastity. Nari thinks it must have been a warrior's once. It seems far sharper and brighter than the tameness of the room.

"Bad day?" the demon asks behind her.

Nari plumps her pillow and stabs her elbows into its softness, disconsolate.

"Go away, demon."

"Weren't you happy to see your parents?"

"No. Nor they me."

"Why?"

She sighs and turns. The demon crouches on the windowsill, blocking the stars.

"Because I do not like their rules."

"Ah."

"Ah?" That's all you have to say?"

"What else is there?"

"Sorry," perhaps?"

"Oh. Sorry."

"You're in a strange mood tonight."

"I am in love. Even for a demon, it is hard."

"You jest with me."

"No."

"You have a strange shape. What are you now?"

"It doesn't matter."

A sudden loneliness comes over Nari. The demon sounds as sorrowful as she feels.

"Come in, demon," she says. "I wish to see you."

The shape in the window pauses... then shrugs. Darkness unfolds into bronze perfection: a man. He strides towards her, lean, naked. Nari leaves her bed and backs away, frightened by the terrible desire in his eyes.

"I told you you'd invite me," he says, smiling. "You know that we belong together."

"No," Nari says, though even she is unconvinced. The demon's beauty might as well have slapped her.

"Why shrink from me?" the demon asks. "I've never yet devoured another demon."

"I'm not—"

"You are. And you are a liar if you say you want this life."

Nari shakes her head, fighting enchantment. The demon has a point. If she were like him there would be nothing to keep her in Bajan Cor. She could marry whoever she wanted or not marry at all. She could say what she wanted and, on any particular day, be whoever suited her.

Yet there is something wrong. The demon, assured, mighty, beautiful, has won his power at a cost. It is in the curl of his lip, as though concealing fangs, the way his shoulders move when he walks: not so much walking as prowling. He has power over the mortal world, but he is not mortal. He must exist outside, observing it like a beggar watching a feast from the other side of a window. And, oh, he is hungry!

"You must go now, demon," Nari says.

"You let me in."

"Then I'll let you out. Go. Now."

The demon laughs and continues to advance. Nari can think of only one thing to do. Before the demon can lunge for her she lunges first—and grabs the white spear from over the bed.

The demon hisses to find a point of metal in his face. The hands with which he shields himself are tipped with cruel black claws.

"Very well," he says, turning slowly into a wolf again. "You may have

this night. But tomorrow I will return. You will not deny me a second time." Fully beast now, he bounds out the window, leaving clawed footprints on the sill. Nari is left standing only by the grace of the spear. Too wild for one world, she thinks. Too human for the other.

Aloud she whispers: "There must be another way. There must, must be another way."

• • •

Seven times the prince attempts to penetrate the whirling sands around Bajan Cor. Seven times he is rebuffed. He returns to his camp limping. His fine turban has been blown away and his once bright clothes are as ragged as his horse. The demon, waiting for him in his bedroll, laughs and laughs, then tries to take him in her arms.

"No," he says, shrugging her away. "Get out. Leave me alone."

"But you have given up on the princess in the tower. You are free to embrace your destiny."

"I will not embrace *you*."

The demon flings herself away from him. "Idiot! If you cannot choose a side, you weren't meant to be alive at all!" In a moment she has become a sand beast, strands of spittle hanging from her lips as she prepares for the attack.

The prince raises his sword.

The demon opens her mouth, revealing the long, jagged darkness that will consume him. She charges.

A few moments later she lies dead. The prince's sword has been blessed nine times by the nine priests of his father's household—they who know the name of every demon on the sands. It is a potent charm, undiminished by the prince's refusal to use it on the lesser demons he has met upon his way. Despite her desire to eat him, the prince considers the death of the demoness unfair. He sits on his haunches, wiping the blade on her tawny fur, and ponders the complexities of his situation. The Raga is a miserable place. Every creature in it demands you declare yourself either good or evil. Yet he has killed a demon and feels sorry for it. Where shall a man of such duality make a home?

The snort of a camel, deep in the distance, pulls him from his thoughts. Across the dunes comes the jingle of harness and the sound of human laughter. In a moment tiny lights appear, crossing a ridge to

the east. He had forgotten about the nomads. They are rumored to be vicious, barely removed from demons themselves. Of course the priests are the ones who told him this—and they said all demons looked like firedrakes...

Slowly, the prince stands. His poor horse needs water but he thinks she can make it over a few more hills.

"Come on, old girl," he says. "Let's find ourselves another life."

• • •

At last, Nari decides she has had enough. As long as she stays at Bajan Cor she will be a victim of either parents or demons. The best thing to do, then, is leave.

The sun is already dipping to the west, hastening the end of day. Nari takes the white spear from its mount and decides she will go and hunt down the demon before it can hunt her. She uses the brittle vines to climb over the top of the garden wall, then she is gone.

Night comes on and she wanders into the desert. The ease of escape has heartened her but the feeling fades with the growing dark. Strange cries wake and stir the sands. There is a smell of blood and campfires. Just at sunset, when the tops of the dunes still glow with rosy light, a caravan of figures cross a ridge in front of her. They carry lamps before them like stars, swaying in their seats atop their camels. Tents follow them and laughter. Soon they vanish over the hill, but the sky beyond takes on the glow of their fires and Nari knows they have set up camp.

She sets her own camp shortly thereafter, within range of their distant voices. Their music comes to her as surely as the demon will: pipes and drumming as wild as anything damned. Yet it is a human sound. She listens, feeling a hunger more powerful than need of food. Who are these desert people? What are they doing, out there in the fragrant night? Their happiness is greater than any human has a right to expect.

It doesn't take long. The moon has barely risen when a wind comes across the dunes. Sandalwood wakes from some secret place, burning in her nostrils, and then the demon is there, striding through her fire: an oiled and beautiful man.

She rises, pretending calm, the spear standing sentinel between them. The demon has come naked, his only decorations the wedding

bells in his hair, the sinuous tattoos that wrap his arms like some thin, curling hide. He stops with his heels still in the fire and crosses his arms in amusement. The little bells in his long, dark hair tinkle with false reassurance.

"So," he says.

"So."

"You look very wild."

"You look very beautiful. We both look something we are not."

"No? Wildness becomes you. I almost believe you will try to use that spear."

"What if I do?"

"I will bite you."

"I'll bite back."

The demon laughs. "See?" he says. "You are a wild thing. Put down that spear and be my wife, beautiful girl."

"I'm not wild," Nari insists. "Nor do I like your rules."

"You cannot tell me you were happy in Bajan Cor."

"I wasn't."

"Then you belong with me."

In answer, Nari thrusts forward with the spear. The demon, expecting more games, barely dodges in time.

"Go away," Nari says. "I'll hurt you."

"You couldn't hurt me if you tried. Without my name, your weapon is a pretty toy." An aura of darkness begins to grow about him. "I see," he says, "that I shall have to make things hard for you."

Nari backs away. There is a rumbling, the ground shaking beneath her as the demon begins to change. His limbs slide back into their bestial form, lengthening, growing claws. A crest of fur breaks out upon his back, his spine arching, his body bending to crouch on all fours. Yet this time he does not settle for the wolf. When he is done changing he continues to grow, the animal rising, seven heads taller, then nine, then ten. The fire goes out as a great paw smothers it. In place of the stars there is a shaggy head, the gleam of cold eyes, the dripping of teeth. Nari looks up and up and nearly falls. She is alone in the dark and the dark is vast.

"You see," the demon says, "I am far more powerful than your symbols or your steel. I was here before Bajan Cor and I will be here after. Kill me and I will return. I will grow with your doubts. Wound me and you

wound a part of yourself. Fight me all you want but in the end I will swallow you whole." He laughs, the ground trembling with his voice. Nari realizes it is her very defiance has made him. Outside the walls of Bajan Cor she has no defense.

"I won't be yours," she says, fighting to make her voice steady, to make it carry to the great tufted ears which loom above her like fan trees. "I won't be something I'm not."

"Now you sound like your mother," the demon says. "She was always on about 'forcing.' She became a wife, in the end. And then she fed you to me." The wolf's mouth opens, teeth flashing. "If you want to be eaten, I can oblige you." He begins to lean down.

"Wait!" Nari cries. Her voice is so shrill it sounds more like a bird's than a girl's. She must keep the demon talking. If she has learned anything it is that demons, before any sort of flesh, feed on the sounds of their own voices. If she can keep the mocking, courage-robbing voice from falling silent, she may live to see another dawn.

"Wait," she repeats. "You knew my mother?" As she speaks she thinks of what her parents said: to defeat your demon, you must name them. But what is the demon's name?

"Bajan Cor has been my hunting ground before your greatest of great grandmothers was born," the demon says. "Of course I knew your mother. She would have made a wonderful demon queen if she'd had half a spine."

What is it? What did her mother say? Nari, opening her mouth to keep stalling, finds the words she needs like a single grain of white rice in a sack of wild.

"She named you," she says. "She knew you."

The demon pauses, his features an ugly snarl. It is the breath before the strike—but in the moment before he pins her with his mighty paw, Nari remembers and begins to scream.

"Asmo!" she shrieks. "Asmo! Asmo! Your name is Asmo!"

"Wrong!" the demon snarls, but he is weakening. His paw descends, crushing, but it is a smaller paw than the one he had a moment ago. Nari chokes for breath, tries to crawl between his fingers.

"Asmo!" she splutters. His strength becomes less. His claws are tightening about her, tearing at her clothes.

"I have a new name now," the demon says, hot spit and breath stinging her cheek. "I have a name for every girl I destroy." The claws

slash and Nari screams, pain blossoming at her throat. He is nearly man-sized again, dizzy with shrinking, but it is taking too long. What new name could he have? What secret name?

It comes like a lightening strike, so simple she would laugh if she weren't pinned beneath a ravening beast.

"Nari!" she says, her eyes locking with his. "You are Nari."

The beast howls and falls back. The fire flares back to life and the thing it frames is a cowering monstrosity, weak and pathetic and foul. Nari bounds to her feet, clutching her throat with one hand and in the other, the spear. Maybe naming your demon makes it mortal. Perhaps, for some people, it merely evaporates when struck with its identity. Whatever the case, Nari knows how to kill her own demon. The spear flashes up and down again, red instead of white and the beast slumps. It is over. Nari examines the spear and then laughs around the pain in her throat. For once, a relic of her parents' beliefs has actually done her some good.

• • •

At sunrise, the prince awakens with a head full of wine. He groans and sits up. Deep snores surround him. The nomads lie in piles of tangled limbs. They were happy to receive him—yet no happier, he thinks, than on any other night.

Wind moves the tent flap, sending a white crack of light dancing across his face. With slow, heavy thought he realizes today would have been his wedding day.

He rises. The nomads show every indication of sleeping until noon. He wants to be gone long before. This life they lead looks good from afar but up close it is ordinary, with neither duty nor demons.

Another way, he thinks, certain that one still exists. *Another way*.

His horse gives him a baleful glance as he saddles her. He laughs, winces, and offers her water before he rides slowly into the dunes. He hardly knows where he is going, but there are fan trees in the distance—perhaps another oasis where he might think. He has only gone a mile when a figure comes striding towards him over the sand.

At first he thinks she is a hallucination. They say spirits may wait at the bottom of a glass and he has had several. Certainly she is unlike any woman or demon he has ever seen. She moves with the subtle

shifting of the wind, its breezes fluttering the pelt of the desert wolf with which she has clad herself. Her hair is unbound and wild and in her hand is a ghost-white spear.

"Hello," she says pleasantly, stopping beside his horse.

"Hello?" He expects her to evaporate at any moment, but she grows only sharper and more beautiful.

"Out for a ride?"

"Yes. I suppose."

"You aren't a demon by any chance?"

"Who, me? No. Not at all."

"Good. I'm rather sick of demons."

"Yes. There are a good many of them about... out here."

"I know. I seem to have found a way around them. At least for now." She adjusts her grip on the spear, leans on it, smiles at him. "So if you aren't a demon," she asks him, "then what are you?"

"Oh. I'm a prince, I suppose. At least, I was. Then I was very nearly a demon and then I tried to be a nomad, but they drink a lot and so this morning I decided I wasn't one of them after all. I'm rather confused, actually. I don't seem to be anything at all this morning."

The girl nods as if this is all understandable.

"You used to be a prince?" she asks.

"Yes. Until yesterday. I crossed the desert to marry a princess."

"Oh, yes. Nari." She nods sadly.

"Is there—is anything wrong?"

"No. Only, if you're looking for Nari you won't find her. She's disappeared."

"Really?" He is regarding the spear. It seems there is some legend in these parts, something to do with a sacred white weapon. Does it guard virgins? Princesses? It seems to belong to her, whatever it is. If it was the tool of a temple, she has adapted it to her use. "Do they know where she has gone?"

The girl regards him, her head cocked to the side. It's a bit of a wild look, and a bit innocent, unladylike but sweet. Her eyes are slanted and very green. Her limbs shimmer in the early heat as though they are part of the dunes. He has been alive nearly twenty years and he has never met anyone this interesting.

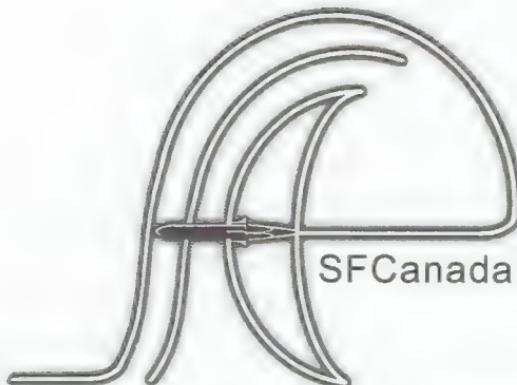
"You seem pleasant," she says, after a while. "Did you like being a prince?"

"Sometimes. Not really. How do you know about Lady Nari? Do you think she's all right?"

The girl smiles. "She's fine," she says. "Maybe if you come and walk with me we'll see if we can find her."

"All right," says the prince, enchanted. She is holding out a desert-brown hand. He hesitates one moment—are princes supposed to do these things?—then slips from his saddle and takes it.

Together he and the girl walk east, into the shimmering light of the new day. •



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She Is Immaculate

Desi Di Nardo

No doubt you will recognize yourself in this
Reading it with a swelling bewilderment
Like a frog bellowing in the pit of your stomach
That sick feeling of being swung too high
The lines will blur from too much staring
The realization, pathetic and slim
You wanted to make something of yourself
But the excuses were grave and sometimes perilous
We had to watch for your health, your poor, delicate feet
Bent and warped by the path not taken
Stumbling and straggling, now you can barely stand
To sit and admire Oprah, quietly as you rock your lamb
Sheppard, stick to the story
Nod with the fans
Swallow your blighted disease •

I try to clear my head. I'm on a
sandy hill. I am in the middle
of a war. I mustn't forget my
training or who I am.

Hesitant Ripples

Alexander Curnow

40 *Seconds before Oblivion* ~

20 *The Sniper Locks Aim* ~

10 *Fires* ~

5

2.5

1.25

0.625

0.3125

0.15625

0.076125

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0.001220703125

SPEED OF LIGHT!

Somehow, I have to rationalize all of this before it's too late. I have less time than I need to think of an explanation.

40 seconds before oblivion

The flash begins but never fades.

I'm lying on a sandy hill with Private Marla Turner. We're sweating buckets. Our uniforms are made for camouflage, not for comfort. The sun is sweltering hot, but what else is new? We're looking out for a sniper hiding in a building on the next hill. This is a war zone—a nasty, messy bloodbath. It chills me up and down, and I know it's affecting Marla the same. We are green, inexperienced in the field. We reassure each other with glances. Our training will serve us well—just think about the training, and we'll make it through.

I take a deep breath in through my nose. I smell sweat, smoke, oil, dirt, gunfire, blood. Why do I smell all that? We've just arrived. We're uninjured and the only people around.

Suddenly life flashes before my eyes. Wait, *flash before my eyes* is the wrong turn of phrase, but the right idea. This is the flash-of-my-life. Its beginning is smaller than an atom. My awareness of the flash is perfect. I feel this quark-sized entity encroaching and building and ballooning without delay. This thing embodies a duality. It grows exponentially while maintaining minuteness. It's infinitesimal, but infinitely large in parallel. How else can I explain it? I'm terrified, and I don't understand.

Then I hear the whine of an incoming artillery shell.

20 seconds, the sniper locks aim.

The flash is larger than everything, smaller than nothing.

An explosion goes off nearby, over Marla's head—to my right. She's ducking from the blast, the ground erupting nearby. Within moments,

sand is raining down on us, pitter-pattering on our helmets. The blast is far enough away to not hurt us, but close enough to send us for a spin. I can't hear a thing, apart from the ringing in my head. Every time I move my head, the world moves along in delay, catching up and snapping into place a second later.

With my senses dulled, the feeling that's building within me is really apparent now. That feeling—that *flash*—is the only clear thing my mind can focus on. Everything else is in disarray. This two-faced flash still builds within me at impossible rates. And for a few seconds, I meditate on this thing that's terrifying me to the core. I try to tie it down within me, but it becomes too small to grasp. Then, when I attempt to ignore the feeling, it unfolds behind me and threatens to consume me. It wants to devour my soul and I know it, driving me to seek a quick solution. Again, when I try pinning the flash down, this feeling inside me becomes too small, building up strength and slipping behind me. I try to flee this phantom hunting my mind, but no matter how fast I go, it always gets closer and closer and...

I smell blood again.

I try to clear my head. I'm on a sandy hill. I am in the middle of a war. I mustn't forget my training or who I am. I look to Marla. She's just uncovering her head now, giving it a shake. It comforts me to look at her, I'm unsure why. I feel drawn to her, connected, waiting for her to realize and look back. I'm looking for some kind of salvation I think.

10 seconds, the sniper fires

The flash is terrifyingly large and alarmingly small.

I feel a rush, like elements of me are speeding up. At the same time, other parts of me slow down, trying to restrain my consciousness. I keep my sights on Marla, using her as a way to balance myself, to stop me from spinning.

She looks over to me at last. Her head turns ever so slowly, brown eyes shining brightly through her dirt-caked eyelids. I can see bewilderment on her face. She seems to have reacted more to the blast than I.

As I focus on her face, everything seems to slow down right in front of me. I can see each facial muscle as it moves, the dirt clogging the pores, each grain of sand on her ears and in her eyelashes. She blinks, and even that appears to take two entire seconds. I watch 15

grains of sand fall slowly, slowing still as they drop. Simultaneously, in my peripheral vision, everything appears to speed up the further it gets out of my focal range. In the mid-range, the wind gusts faster than I've ever seen it, puffs of smoke whipping by at cartoon-like speeds. In my wide-ranging periphery, countless explosions are going off in the space of a breath. I can't even begin to comprehend what I see.

The strange flash—that's-my-life looms closely again. I feel like this force has opened a channel to me, a channel to touch and forever consume me. This conduit is long and cylindrical and lined with spirals that flare outwards on their way to me. It'll bore right into me.

I can see that same recognition and fear forming on Marla's face. How does she see my fears within me? We are just soldiers, trying to kill a sniper before the sniper kills us. Everything seems so out of sync around me.

I hear an explosion. Smaller than the last.

5

That *flash* has found a conduit to me.

My entire world focuses in on Marla, and I suddenly feel near to her. Everything around me melts away slowly, and meanwhile, time passes so fast and I can hardly follow it. I analyze these effects on me, and it's as if a two-toned, multi-sensory corkscrew closes in around my soul like a snake's stranglehold, around everything except Marla's face. One tone seems sped up beyond time. From this tone, my mind picks up snapshots of the near future, and beyond into the far future. The other tone delivers mental nausea—the cold, quivering sensation before you vomit. While I look at it, I feel like I've been turned upside down and inside out, dragged backwards in the direction opposite to the first tone.

Marla, the stability amidst my overwhelming vertigo, becomes the only thing left. Time moves so slowly and I can see her so clearly, that I can perceive things down to microscopic proportions. I can make out the tiniest of bugs on her skin, then bacteria, and then every cell in detail. I fill my mind and heart with the reassuring perspective of her whole face. Her big, beautiful brown eyes, I set in the forefront of my entire mind's capacity. I feel I can stretch this scene across the entire universe, filling it, and then withdrawing to admire and love this vision with unmatched fullness.

Within my universe—inside Marla's eyes—I've encapsulated more power than ten thousand suns. It feels like a detonation underlies it all: that a powerful blast I trace right back to the flash—that's-my-life becomes tangible. This is a fatal conduit, one I know I can't escape. I am Marla's eyes. I see supernovas in each pupil, blossoming out toward me. On one hand, I feel every sense of terror, because I am her windows to the soul. On the other hand, I'm still behind the material of her cornea.

In a sense I feel protected. I stand fast, retreating only a whisker before the supernova touches me. It burns me, boils me, stews me and takes me to the precipice of oblivion, but not over it. As the supernova ends its life-cycle, it starts to withdraw, beginning the inverse cycle.

2.5

No dice?

I fall head over heels for you. Marla, I believe I love you: you are my everything. There's nothing else, and I adore you for all you are.

Perhaps it's only love as strong as this that makes me feel sudden sorrow. My fault, I know—I got too close to you, Marla. I'm standing at the edge of your universe. My happiness shrinks with the supernova in collapse. Everything that I've come to love in this brief eternity is imploding.

No astronomer *truly* can illustrate how a black hole forms. 'A star collapses' is a crude way of expressing this sudden obliteration of my core being. The supernova is reverting at immeasurable speeds, and almost instantly winks out. But time for me has slowed down so much that I ride the peak of this immense crunch, time passing so quickly and for so long that the cosmos has been born and has died twenty-three times over.

My brain starts piecing the 'real' events back together. I used to be a soldier, I am still am a soldier, I was never, I am, I will never be. This is all about Marla—I must work out how this event has ungrounded me. Why do I feel so horribly distressed? I must clear my mind and return to earth.

I should've known. The sniper doesn't miss and neither does the conduit unto me.

I see the event in three frames. One: Marla looking terrified at me, and a bullet an inch from her head. Two: Marla looking terrified at me, the bullet cutting into the side of her skull. Three: Marla in her last moments' awareness, as the bullet passes into her brain.

1.25

Prognosis: *flash-blindness.*

Blood sprays and there goes the love of my life. I'm deflating from immense pressures, watching Marla travel down an endless tunnel toward death. Is this why all the abstraction is going on? Does it happen to her in the moment before she dies, and am I the last person she connects with before she's gone? Can she read the same intensity within me?

I question all of these things, but it's too late. I've found gratitude and appreciation for something I've lost. I could've connected to Marla at any time. Marla, I don't know where you were born, what your parents were like, how your life went, the happiness and sadness throughout. I waited until this final moment, and *now* I'm full of regret.

I want desperately to find these things out. I feel insufficient, like I should've known this, that I'm a complete failure for not opening up enough or trying hard enough beforehand.

That's when I start to really reflect upon myself. Life—it is so short, so precious; and I see that now. Did I really have to wait this long, to see this happen to Marla before I gained recognition for life's value? Why am I squandering my existence, and what else can I do to improve on it?

As I'm being pulled into Marla's collapsing star, I turn around to look at me. Something seems terribly wrong. The image of Marla remains strong in my mind, but not the spray of brain matter.

I forgot that I *became* Marla's eyes. Somehow I've missed the obvious. I reconnect with my nervous system and I'm chilled.

0.625

Oh.

It's like the image has been there all my life; showcased, and I never paid attention to it once. Somehow this reminds me of the day I was born. My past, my entire life's events are catching up to me from behind, condensing and becoming perfectly clear. All my memories are accessible now, as time has slowed so much that I can count an eye's-blink in hours.

As events clarify, I'm looking into Marla's eyes and seeing my fate reflected. That's why she's so terrified. She's in the middle of watching my brains getting blown out. I'm not precisely dead yet though. Why

not? Everything is gearing down instead. Life is ending for me and this is the last bit of living given to me. What is the nature of this extension? Whether it's gift or a torment, I cannot figure it out.

When time goes this slowly and your mind is unperturbed by that change, a heightened definition of things comes into being. It seems like I can see with my whole mind, not just my eyes. I feel connected to all objects between Marla and me. I feel every strand of hair, grain of sand, drop of perspiration. I'm currently obsessed with the fragments of my broken skull. My fear has changed into a morbid self-indulgence with my own demise. I've accepted fate, the chill is subsiding, and I'm curious to see where this is going.

0.3125

I'ts a shame you can't come too.

The bullet is no longer in the freshly-fired shape it left the gun in. It has denatured somewhat, flattening, moving on through with little resistance. I follow the bullet. I feel it inside my skull, closing with the point that shuts out my lights. I'm conscious of this point. I'll never reach my demise at this rate. The increments of time I experience are continually cut in half, so I'm always twice as far—chronologically—as I'll ever be from death.

My attention is at the microscopic level now. The bullet is the only thing moving fast enough at this scale to gauge movement from, now. I'm in a chase where distance halved equates to time expenditure reduced by the same, and I can't get any closer, no matter how much I try. Time gets equally slower.

Too late, I suddenly start to worry, like someone already stuck in temporal quicksand. I hope time doesn't just halt and wait there, with me still able to think vividly like this. What a hell that would be! Or, maybe this is limbo for those not even worth damnation. I fear I have missed the grade, that I haven't accumulated enough credit to buy more time or passage to a place better. This is it then. This is death: ever approaching nothingness, but never getting there. My perception of life's passage has just about stopped now, but there's nothing I can do. Nothing I can do, but think on it.

0.15625

The helter-skelter within the trail.

I'm chasing the bullet, following the butt end of the slug getting closer to the pinch-point of 'time=death'. My attention is on the chase, even if my velocity decreases to 19 billion years per metre. For a million years, I am at one with this hot shard passing through my brain. But, despite my devotion to developments here, and despite my waiting, nothing new happens. I keep on waiting, watching. Bullet, and therefore time, has effectively stopped while I remain focused on the full view of the thing before me.

My attention wanes. I scale down to the atomic level. Even atoms move in slow motion. How deep can I go? Am I limited by the inventory of my mind's perception, or will I be able to see things nobody alive has seen? I'm scared, unready to go deeper yet.

I zoom out, returning to normal scale. It would appear nothing has changed in the world since the eons ago I departed from my position upon the sandy hill. Marla's beautiful and terrified eyes still reflect my outcome.

I focus back in on the bullet. On approach, I see something I missed before, something seemingly unimportant, but at least something else to study while mired in the gear-down. I start perceiving a spiral path cutting through my brain. The flash has become the corkscrew wake of my killer.

0.076125

The Accelerator Song

The path seems to have dimension. The corkscrew trail exhibits more than the aspects of disturbed trail of air around the bullet, or a tunnel being sliced through my brain matter. The trail is vaporous, colourless, untoachable and still soft. Contradictory but ever present, the wake opens up a new level of investigation for me, and I dive right in.

The corkscrew trail shimmers; it's beautiful. I get in as close as I can, and it holds form. The wake isn't made of any units, subunits or building blocks of any kind. I attempt to penetrate the substance of this trail, trying to figure out what it's made from. It physically resists me. I try harder, throwing myself up against a solid wall. Each time I hit the spiral barrier, it reverberates, bouncing me back. Starting with a mental run up, I get into a rhythm, and keep trying to break inside.

I don't know why I keep hitting against the wall, other than I have nothing else to do. For a long time I batter it. After a while, I can vaguely

make out reverberations, a high pitched humming. As if suddenly possessed, I ram the bullet's spiral over and over, faster and faster, the hum getting louder. I want to shatter the spiral.

0.0390625

False Momentum

The shimmering wake sings until the point at which its own frequency destroys it. I shatter it. The spiral breaks off into relatively equal lengths. The freed pieces float away from their previous track at a relatively normal speed. The shot is ahead still, appearing motionless on its way to the point I've concluded is death.

As the shattered spiral shards bounce idly about, I decide to reach for the bullet again. Immediately I'm there without any resistance. The bullet slows no more, and I can see it moving. I mentally brace in anticipation as it closes with the end I both welcome and dread.

I expect oblivion. Instead, the bullet hits an invisible wall, the point of my death, and I remain conscious. I watch avidly as the shot bounces lazily from this destined 'time=death' point. The shot continues tumbling backwards, bouncing off the walls of the tunnel. The slug comes to a rest after a spin. It hangs there. I wonder whether any of this is real.

And suddenly the spiral is intact again, like nothing ever happened.

0.01953125

Clutch in

I fear limbo. Time has come to the end of its march. I'm wary of the insane ramblings of my mind; there would be nothing to bounce them off of. There's nobody else here, no voice of reason to hear me out. As 'time' or whatever this temporal experience is, passes, I start to feel the wear and tear of eternities alone. By myself, so lonely, I wonder what I did to deserve this. I use the heightened definition granted to me to examine my mind. I analyze every memory I ever had, everything I ever said, anything that I could help pinpoint in my life, in the slim hope that a revelation will save me from this.

I guess I'm not *completely* alone. I focus back out to the human size and see Marla there. I look into her eyes forever, waiting for answers.

Why won't you tell me Marla? Tell me what went wrong!

Then I see something stranger than the bullet. Though Marla remains perfectly still, a tear issued from each eye and rolls down her face in my mind's real time.

0.009765625

Shift into 'everything' gear

I examine the bullet spiral, the transcendent wake connecting me and my life to inevitability. I begin to see how this may fit together, unless my perception deceives me. The wake, instead of ending at me, now starts with me at the 'time=death' point of demise, at the pinpoint of the bullet's conclusion and happenstance governor of time that simultaneously marks my fate. The bullet is merely a convenient conduit focusing on a point finer than my infinite ability to perceive in timelessness. Backwards, and expanding, the wake passes out of the bullet wound in the side of my head, travelling right on through the long barrel of the sniper's gun and onwards, cone still widening right on through the eye of the galaxy's core and out into the cosmos, until it's the breadth of the universe, until it *is* the universe. Am *I* the universe?

After I survey everything that exists for me, I zoom back in at breakneck speed, allowing myself to feel a sense of tremendous velocity. I abruptly realize these strands are attached to everything, like bungee cords, stretched out and allowing things to exist in their own relative perception for the duration of 'life'. Is this, *was* this, life for me then? Me, but tethered to a bungee-cord and flung into the material, sentient realm of tangibility?

Why?

I return to the origin point, the anchor to my corporeality, and take a mental breather. The bullet still rests there, spiral still intact with its shed pieces still free. Focusing on the wake, I stretch out my feelings and emotions toward it. The shimmer starts beating like a newborn heartbeat, picking up pace with building enthusiasm.

0.0048828125

Clutch out

Thus, all the time I've lost in this crawling chronology has manifested

within the spiral. Time is absorbed in that shimmering band, that bungee-cord of mine. The wake pulses faster and faster and starts emitting small shockwaves. From these currents I feel a sensation of gravity washing over me.

The *flash* that haunted me before is beginning once again. Instead of growing unchecked within my terrified mind, it grows from within the source. I'm no longer scared of it, however. It seems warm and inviting although I don't know what's in store. No longer do I feel hollow and lonely. I feel familiarity. I receive a fresh sense of infinite identity, through and through. The more I sense this, the more passionate I become. This seems so much *more* like what I am, or part of. I consider then, *what is life?*

0.00244140625

Bring it up to universal speed

The tempo of the spiral tremors speed up. The force of these rings increase weight on me. The quicker the wake beats, the more I realize I won't be able to hold on indefinitely. Although this is a chronologically-tempered mental experience, mentality in itself starts to feel physically caging in comparison to the immensity of what I'm being pushed towards. I reflect on the freedom from my inferior, physical form, realizing that mentality, thought and reason are just as burdensome as my body seemed upon entering this state. The pulsing wake beckons a higher form of existence.

I'm hesitant to delve right in. I'm fighting ripples of gravity as they break onto me. I try holding onto my simple mental and physical definitions as much as I can, but I'm being pushed out of focus. I slip back out to the view of Marla and hold for a moment. Her image is unchanged, with the tears still there, waiting to fall from her chin. Nevertheless, I am nothing compared to this huge pull. The ripples pound me further and further away from what I considered 'reality'.

0.001220703125

Jump into the corridor

I feel like I've been launched from a taut slingshot. I'm careening, accelerating away from Earth, from the Milky Way, to wherever these

massive ripples are taking me. A few times I try to scramble back to what I know. There's no way, I'm completely helpless. It's hard to keep myself and my thoughts together anymore. Like a vise opens, my attention is wrenched apart.

My primal, basic thoughts are pulled from me first. I no longer fear anything. Survival isn't even a consideration now. Sustenance, reproduction, breathing are all torn away, lingering only as distant needs. And it's just the beginning of what's happening to me. I'm being sped up and stretched out.

0.0006103515625

Breakneck

I find it hard to remember who or what I am. Where am I? All I seem to know is this velocity. I'm unafraid. I just don't know what's going on.

I feel like I'm in touch with this phenomenon. I've sensed this speed is more like a stretching action, an expansion of something colossal. This immensity has no edges. First, I think it's an expanding ring. Then, I quickly become aware of another dimension—it's an exploding sphere.

0.00030517578125

Finding the crest

The very fabric of me is becoming this sphere. Both 'sphere' and 'me' are suddenly one thing, as if they were always together, and it feels more and more like I'm returning to it from a hiatus—measured by something called 'time passage' and justified through sentience.

I let myself become spread out. Exhilarated, I seek out the very edge of the horizon. The edge is racing outwards, making me larger with every passing moment. While I ride the crest of this explosion, I realize I'm not alone. Conversely, I find there is no 'me' or 'I' left, but only a single *master unit* with anomalies proliferating from it, masquerading as unique identities. Me-the-anomaly catches up with the rest of the all-encompassing 'master-unit that is everything', ending the hiatus. I find 'I am a small spherical ripple centered somewhere within the master-unit's ripple, emerging after and ultimately drawing level with the omnipotent unit once more. Clearly, this is the same source that bore me.

0.000152587890625

Looking back

The difference between ‘me’ and the ‘master unit’ equates to ‘life’ and ‘time’. This, the universe of universes, presides over the march of time, and it is my entirety—now caught up and grafted back into its place. While I am realigned, I reflect upon my life. This was the period when I thought myself as God, an individual, a unit of significance. Maybe I remember this through the old habit—*attachment*—while I skim over the contents of my life. I was born and right away I picked up speed: learning, and understanding, and trying to expunge life through enlightenment. And I was right to seek enlightenment, because the more I learned, the quicker my *hesitant ripple* caught up to the master-unit’s wave. The moment of my death was marked by the onramp back to universality. I’ve connected back to myself and needn’t live a moment longer with the momentum I’ve re-established.

0.0000762939453125

No looking back

There’s no looking back now. How foolish was I to exist in the first place! I needed to expend energy learning and understanding before I could get back to the What Is. Curious—I believe we created an entire planet of likeminded anomalies, to huddle together in a moment of confusion.

Sentience and the universe go hand in hand somehow. I’ve let my identity go. My memories are gone. They’re jumping about like sparks somewhere in infinity.

?~?

What’s left?

Is there a point to this?

I don’t know.

I don’t care.

But don’t get me wrong.

I’m happy.

I am enlightened.

?~?

This is why I am relating this story to you.

I'm winding down.

Expendng the moments before the last elements of individuality wink out.

I could go on forever, for time is irrelevant.

I've reconnected with the gap between me (god) and the master unit.
If you see Marla, tell her it's going to be okay.

0.0000011920928955078125...

Hesitation of life

I was born. I ended up separated from the universe. I contained all the confusion and misunderstanding in something equally unreal. Then I lived and died. That which is 'I'/'me' grinds to a halt.

0.001220703125

Blast of the universe

The big bang. There's no big crunch; only the need to catch up even more if you're yet to be born. You will live longer, learn more and suffer at those exponentially longer lengths.

0.001220703125

The ripple ensues.

Physical action and mental revelation. Exertion is the only way the inner ripples catch up. These things drive the master unit.

SPEED OF LIGHT!

Hold on tight. It only gets better. •

I swear, Queen Elizabeth has fewer protocols than the Fay; it's like hanging out with a dozen Miss Manners.

Glamour

B.C. Holmes

"Is there something wrong?" I asked my therapist, although I was pretty sure that she was supposed to be the one asking me that question.

"No, no," she said. "It's just... some of the things you talk about are hard to believe."

"Do you want me to do another trick?" Shortly after I started seeing Lynn, I made her cat look like a lion to prove my point. Truth be told, it's the only trick I've ever mastered. Oh well. Better than being written up as having an over-active fantasy life.

"No. I believe you," Lynn said, and was quiet for a moment. Lynn operated her practice out of her home; it wasn't stuffy, or institutional. Even her clothes were informal: lots of soft cotton. I don't think I could have been quite as trusting of someone in an office with a leather couch.

Finally, Lynn asked, "So how do you feel about this... this elevation into the Seelie court?"

"I don't know," I said. My usual response whenever Lynn asked how I felt about something. "I just... I mean, I was probably the least popular girl in my school. Scrawny. Short. And the ears... people used to make fun of me all the time. Now I'm this high muckety-muck. I don't know how I'm supposed to deal with that sometimes."

But I could see that I'd lost her again; she was wrestling with disbelief. "I'm sorry," she said. "It's hard, sometimes. You don't... you

don't look like that now. You look like a glamour model."

I nodded. "That's a very interesting word. Glamour."

• • •

Greysmith was waiting for me when my session ended.

"Really, Amber," he said, "I don't see why you come here."

"She's helping me," I replied.

He rolled his eyes, and waved me toward the car. A Jaguar this time. Greysmith had a weakness for expensive cars. It looked great, but it had the faint sparkle of glamour, and it drove like a Honda Civic. We rode for a while in silence.

"House Birchbark," he said suddenly. Pop quiz time.

"Uh... a griffin and a dragon on a green shield. Lord Birchbark is Seelie. The family despises House Willowholm, and for whatever stupid reason, is insulted if you serve them meat from hooved animals."

"Very good, Amber," he said, absent-mindedly stroking his silvery mane of a beard. "We'll make a Pennydreadful out of you yet."

Yeah, I belong to House Pennydreadful. Yes, I know that's a stupid name. Greysmith worked for my father, Lord Pennydreadful of the Seelie Court. A father that I didn't know existed until I was eighteen years old.

"So when am I gonna see this Fog Lord guy?" I asked. The Fog Lord was the head of House Squallsplitter—the Hatfields to our McCoys.

"Patience, Amber," Greysmith said, and drove on for a while. "You think like them," he said after a long silence. When Greysmith said *them*, he meant humans.

"Funny, that," I replied.

"You're Fay. You have all the time in the world to learn about your enemy, but you're impatient. It'll be your downfall, mark my words." He frowned, and made low growly noises in his throat. "Expect to meet the Fog Lord in about fifty years. Maybe sixty."

"And in the meantime," I said acidly, "I'll just keep getting my charm school lessons from you, right?"

He didn't answer.

• • •

Back at my apartment, Greysmith wanted me to serve tea. The Fay tea service is this big, elaborate ritual; and if you don't get all parts of it correct, you'll offend your host or your guest. I swear, Queen

Elizabeth has fewer protocols than the Fay; it's like hanging out with a dozen Miss Manners.

The phone rang.

"Yeah?" I answered. "You're kidding." Pause. "No, send her up." I hung up. Greysmith was still waiting for me to rearrange something on the tea table.

"My mother's here," I said.

Greysmith's mouth puckered in displeasure. "I beg your leave, then, milady."

"Yeah, go," I said. He walked into the hall closet and shut the door. I keep my portal in there.

I shifted my appearance into my family look: a glamour that looks enough like my original face that somebody could believe that I was just a late bloomer.

A few minutes later, the doorbell rang. I took a deep breath and squared my shoulders.

"Hello Angie," mother said. Yeah. Human name for humans; faerie name for faerie. Glamour isn't just about appearances. My mother gave me a brief, hollow-feeling hug. As usual, she smelled of hairspray.

She scanned the apartment, the surprise evident on her face. "This is an awfully big place." It was true; it was a good-sized apartment, with a huge picture window that looked out over the waterfront. My faerie father gives me a pretty sizable living allowance. It probably helps him feel less guilty about the fact that I almost never get to see him.

"I didn't know that you were in the city," I said.

"Is it pricey?" she asked. I'd told her that I worked as a receptionist. Truth is, my real job has been learning the rules of Fay society.

"It's not bad. What brings you to Toronto?" But she wasn't paying any attention to my questions. I narrowed my eyes.

She ran her fingertip across the length of one of my shelves. "What about this furniture? How do you afford all this?" I wondered if she thought that I had some secret job as a high-paid call-girl or something.

"I have a roommate," I lied. "Most of this stuff isn't mine. Are you in town long?"

"Oh," she said. "And what's your roommate's name?" And there was just something about the way she asked; I knew she didn't really care what my fictional roommate's name was. She wanted to know whether my roommate was a man or a woman.

"Chris," I said.

• • •

"What are you feeling, now?" Lynn, my therapist, asked.

"I don't know," I replied.

"How does your body feel?"

"I don't know."

Lynn's eye glanced sideways, over in the direction of the clock. Yeah, I know I was being difficult. I was in a bad mood. I get that way when I have to spend time with my mother.

"The way you're sitting is all clenched up," she said after a while.

"My mother drives me crazy. I hate feeling like this. I want to know what it takes to get past this."

"What it takes is a willingness to look at the feelings that have developed."

I frowned. "I don't know what I feel," I said.

"Doesn't that suggest something to you?" she asked. "You've numbed yourself. Your feelings have been neglected for so long that you've learned to deaden yourself to them. But they're still there. They still affect you."

I sat there for a few moments. Lynn keeps a box of Kleenex in the centre of the coffee table; sometimes I play a game with myself where I see how long I can hold in the tears that are always threatening to come out during these sessions.

"What were you thinking when your mother came over?" Lynn asked.

I pondered this. "I thought I might impress her. I thought that if she saw my fancy apartment, maybe she wouldn't rag on me about getting a better job, or getting married, or all the other million things she goes on about."

"Is it possible that you hoped that she'd say something nice? Maybe compliment you?"

"My mother doesn't do that. Nothing you do is good enough for her."

"But maybe you still look for it."

"I don't need that from her."

"What are you feeling now?"

My shoulders were tight. I think I was unconsciously trying to pull my head into my body, like a turtle. "I don't know," I said.

• • •

I climbed into the Mercedes and slammed the door.

"Good session?" Greysmith asked.

I grunted.

"You know, ladies of the Fay don't grunt."

"This one does," I said.

Greysmith sighed. "One day, Amber, you need to realize that there are things that are done, and things that are not done. Our society is ruled by protocol. The Fog Lord will eat you alive if you cross a boundary you're not supposed to cross, and if you've alienated the Seelie court with your unmannered ways, there'll be no one to catch you when you fall."

"Wow, that was deep," I said, blandly. "Can you drop me off at Grappa?"

Everything about Greysmith seemed to sag, then. He didn't say a word for the rest of the car ride.

• • •

I loved the smell of Grappa: fried garlic, tomato sauce and warm olive bread. One of my old schoolmates was getting married, and a bunch of us crowded into the elegant restaurant. I picked a seat near Tina and Lisa.

"Hey Angie! Long time, no thee," Lisa said. Lisa had her lisp, Tina had her brains, Marcie was overweight and I had those ears. We were the obvious targets in our school, and found safety in numbers.

"You look really different," Tina said.

"I finally found a hairdresser that could give some body to my hair," I lied. "How's the computer stuff going?"

"Good, actually. We IPO'ed last month."

I nodded, but really I had no idea what she'd just said. Tina looked really different, too. She still had those pop-bottle glasses, but she was wearing an expensive, tailored pantsuit. And she was wearing make-up, which she never did in school. She made me a little bit uneasy. Afraid, I suppose, that she'd overtaken me. Truth is, although they were my friends, I used to look down on Tina and Lisa. I suppose I liked hanging around with them 'cause they made me feel like I wasn't at the complete bottom of the pyramid. Yeah, I know that's pretty shallow.

"Where's Marcie?"

"Didn't you hear?" Lisa said. "Her thtore burnt down." Marcie and her husband had an appliance store in Mississauga.

"The police are saying arson," Tina added. "They think either

Marcie or Tom did it. Y'know, for the insurance. The police have been harassing them for days."

"Jeezuz," I said. I wanted to ask if either of them thought Marcie did it, but wasn't sure how.

And that's when I noticed the guy at the bar. Gorgeous. But he also had that sparkle to him. He was wearing glamour.

I made some excuse to leave the table, and head over to the bar. Lisa watched me the whole time, her expression an odd combination of incredulity and hero-worship.

• • •

His name was Lorien, and he belonged to House Wolvesbane. Wolvesbane and Pennydreadful had an alliance pact, so technically he was on our side. His true face was narrow and canine, and he smelled like trees. His glamour face was Hispanic and square-jawed, with a slight pout and a long ponytail. He had even added the smell of expensive aftershave to the glamour.

We went back to my apartment, and there was this awkward exchange where he wouldn't actually enter unless I invited him in using all the proper phrases and titles, and references to our respective Houses. Greysmith, of course, wasn't around when I needed him.

Lorien scanned the apartment, and sniffed the air. "I understand that you know the boggart, Greedle?" he said.

"Yeah," I said. Greedle had sworn fealty to my father, and would sometimes drop by with Greysmith. Greedle wasn't too bright, but human things fascinated him. He liked to spend time in my kitchen playing with the appliances. He especially liked the waffle iron.

Oh. Shit shit shit.

"Greedle caused the fire at Marcie's store," I said.

Lorien nodded.

"I haven't seen him for weeks."

Lorien frowned. "He came through two weeks ago. I assumed that he was staying with you."

"No," I said.

"Very well. I should take my leave of you. Do you have a portal?"

"Oh," I said, surprised and maybe disappointed. "In the hall closet."

"Should we have sex first?" he asked. One thing I like about the Fay is the directness.

• • •

"Greysmith is gone," I said.

"Gone?" Lynn asked.

"I hurt his feelings."

"How?"

"I was snide with him. The Fay are peculiar about stuff like that."

"You've talked about their obsession with manners."

"They're a bit simple," I said. "You're either an ally, or an enemy. If you offend an ally, they'll tell you, and you must make amends or become an enemy."

"So can't you just make amends?"

"It's more complicated than that. I'm a high muckety-muck and he's sworn fealty to my father. He's not just an ally; he's like a servant or something, and so any criticism reflects badly on him." I shook my head. "I'm so stupid," I said.

Lynn shifted in her chair. "When you were living with your parents—your human parents—how were things communicated?"

"They weren't," I replied.

"How did your parents show affection?"

"They didn't."

"People need affection," Lynn said.

"Did you learn that in therapist school?" I asked. "I'm sorry," I added quietly. "That just came out."

"Do you think that maybe you developed behaviours that would help you find out whether or not people cared about you? Maybe you learned to lash out at people because then at least you'll know that they care about what you say."

I didn't say anything.

"What are you feeling?"

"I think I'm a terrible person," I said. "I'm mean, and selfish."

"You're a beautiful and intelligent woman," she said. How did she know that I craved flattery?

That was it. Game over. Tears, 1: Amber, 0. I reached over and grabbed the Kleenex.

• • •

I parked the car, and put on the hazards. I jumped out and stood before the Princes' Gate, the giant, masonry archway that served as the

main entrance to the Canadian National Exhibition grounds. There was traffic along Lakeshore, even at that late hour; but I figured that they wouldn't notice anything. I suppose I could have done this at home, but not with the car and all.

I wasn't very good at summonings, and Greysmith knew that. I remembered something he'd once said: "A portal is not merely a door, Amber; it must be crafted, not made." The Princes' Gate was probably the most crafted thing I knew of.

In my hand, I clutched a shiny grey stone. "Greysmith," I said. "I am holding your token; attend me."

The air in front of me blurred, and Greysmith stepped through. He knelt. "I await your instruction, Lady Amber," he said sourly.

"You used to just call me Amber," I said.

"That wouldn't be proper."

I bit my lip for a moment. "It was wrong of me, Greysmith. I'm sorry. I was horrible to you."

"It is not my place to comment."

"I got you a Porsche," I said, and I pointed in the direction of the car. He looked up. "It's real, not glamour. It even has one of these," I said, and pushed the little button. The car went beep-beep, and the doors locked. "Oh, I almost forgot: I give this to you free of strings." There's a whole lot of messy stuff about gift giving in Fay culture.

"Milady," he said, stunned. And then he started to cry. Big wuss. "Oh, milady," he said, "you are too good to me. You were well within your rights to chastise me."

"No I wasn't, Grey," I said, "no matter what the rules say."

• • •

We were going way too fast along the QEW. It was the first time that Greysmith had driven a standard, and he liked shifting gears.

"Their machines have a sort of cachet among our people right now," he said. "They're clever beings."

I nodded. "Is there a real Robin Goodfellow?" I asked.

"No. Shakespeare had no idea what he was talking about."

"Grey," I asked, "why did my father leave me with humans?"

"I don't know the full details. Something about protecting you from the Fog Lord."

"My human parents think that I'm their daughter. They brought

me home from the hospital and everything."

"But you were a cuckoo." Cuckoos leave their eggs in the nests of other birds.

"Was there..." I was almost afraid to ask. "Was there another baby?"

"I really don't know," he said, and shifted gears again. The Toronto skyline whizzed by us.

• • •

"Hu... Hello?" Marcie answered.

"Hi Marcie, it's Am... Angie," I said, and shifted the phone a bit.

"Oh, hi," she replied, somberly.

"We missed you the other night."

A pause. "Yeah, well we've got a lot going on."

"I know. I heard." A longer pause. "Look, Marcie, I know things are really bad, and I know the police are hassling you unfairly. If there's anything I can do, please let me know."

"That's really kind," she said, but I could hear that she was fighting back tears.

"Are you holding up okay?" I asked.

"I'm fine," she said, and was quiet for a while. "Angie, if I ask you something, will you promise never to repeat it?"

"Of course, Marcie."

"You don't think Tom would have done this, do you?" This is what the stress had done to her. She didn't trust her husband.

"No, Marcie. I know he wouldn't."

"Oh," she said, and I don't know if she was convinced.

• • •

"I remember coming home from school once, when I was about ten. There were a bunch of suitcases in the living room; my parents were about to leave on vacation for two weeks. Hawaii. They arranged for my aunt to come and stay with me, but I remember thinking, 'When were you going to tell me this?'" I looked down at the floor.

"What are you feeling, now?"

"I feel... guilty," I said.

"Guilty?" Lynn asked.

"They weren't the kind of parents you see in the TV movie of the week, or anything. They didn't abuse me."

"No, I didn't think so."

"So why do I hate them so much?"

"Sometimes, if there's something overt, like abuse for instance, at least you have something to blame. When you're dealing with neglect, you can never put your finger on what they're doing. It's because they're not doing."

Is that what this is? I wondered. *Neglect?* "Y'know, I used to pretend that they weren't really my parents," I said. "I used to imagine that I was a... a princess or a gypsy, and that my real parents would come back for me, and life would be so much better."

Lynn sat in silence.

"Well, I got that," I said. "My faerie father did come back for me, and he's just as distant as my human parents."

"And how does that make you feel?"

"Disappointed. Embarrassed. Like even my fantasies have failed me. And then I start thinking things. Like maybe my human parents could somehow sense that I wasn't human. Maybe they just couldn't feel anything for me because subconsciously they knew that I'm not really their daughter. And I hate feeling like I'm making excuses for them." I was shaking. "I can't forgive them."

• • •

The door buzzer chimed. I looked inquiringly at Greysmith; he shrugged his shoulders. The concierge hadn't announced anyone.

"Who is it?" I asked.

"Lady Amber," the voice said, "I stand outside your door, and I beg sanctuary." It was Greedle.

I threw the door open and grabbed the boggart by the scruff of his... uh... neck, I guess. "Get in here, you!" I said.

"Milady, milady," he cooed, "they're after me. Hide me, please."

"Listen, you. Do you have any idea what you've done? Do you know that Marcie and Tom are my friends?"

"Noooooo," Greedle said. He held his hands in front of his face and I could see that they had waffle indentations on them. He liked to waffle things.

"Because of you, Marcie and Tom are in a lot of trouble. You burned down their store, and you've probably ruined their marriage as well." Greedle scooted around behind the couch.

"You stupid little worm. What the hell were you thinking?" I screamed. "Were you even using your head at all?"

"Amber, stop!" Greysmith said. "He's just a boggart. He can't handle fury like that." I didn't stop. I continued to yell, to lash out with blistering phrases.

But I stopped when I realized that I'd heard some of those phrases out of my mother's mouth.

I could hear him behind the couch: "Ow. Ow. Ow. Greedle bad. Ow. Greedle bad. Owwwwwwww."

I gritted my teeth and went to the knick-knack shelf and picked up a small statue of a wolf. Then I went to the hall closet. "Packleader Lorien," I said, "I am holding your token. I request your presence."

The closet opened and Lorien emerged, suave and dark.

"He's behind the couch," I said. "Get him out of my sight."

• • •

Later, I tried to hide out in my bedroom; Greysmith knocked on the door. "Milady," he said, "Packleader Lorien requests an audience."

I sighed. "Fine. Send him in."

"Milady?"

"He's seen my bedroom, Grey. Send him in already."

Lorien came in and sat beside me on the bed. His shoulder touched against mine.

"What do we do about Marcie and Tom?" I asked.

Lorien shrugged. "We can't make things as they were, but I think we can make things better than they are now. If someone were to confess to the arson, for example, the police would stop harassing your friends. I think that a bit of glamour could make that happen."

"And what about Greedle?"

"We sealed him in a jar, and hid the jar under a mountain. We'll let him out in twenty years or so."

"And what then?"

"He'll still have fealty to your family, and he can return to his duties having atoned for his offense."

I was trying to decide how I felt about that. I mean, twenty years is a long time, but for the Fay it's not like it's most of your life or anything.

"He hurt my friends," I sniffled.

Lorien thought for a moment. "I sympathize; really, I do. But he

doesn't understand what he did. He doesn't understand about stores, or livelihoods, or the stresses that your friends were under. He's just a boggart who thinks that waffle irons make pretty patterns. Under faerie law, his infraction results in banishment or confinement. Such punishments are strict, but direct, and without long-term consequences.

"On the other hand," he continued, "I suspect that few faeries have been subjected to the fury and bitterness that you directed at him, and I imagine that he will carry that with him for the rest of his existence."

He said all this dispassionately; and I really wanted him to pull me closer, to hold me, because I really felt worthless, then.

• • •

A week later, as Greysmith and I were working on the tea service again, the closet door opened. A red-faced man with muttonchops and a nineteenth century British military uniform emerged. He wore stiff leather boots and carried a riding crop.

He glared at Greysmith. "Leave us," he said.

"Yes, my lord," Greysmith replied, and slunk away to the hall.

"Hello father," I said.

He removed his helmet and gloves, and set these on an end table. "Good morning, Amber," he said.

"I've just made some tea."

"Ah, jolly good," he said. I'm pretty sure it was affectation.

"To what do I owe the honour?"

"Mm," he grunted. "This woman—the therapist—Lynn. Stop seeing her."

My heart sank as I poured his tea. I tried to compose myself. "Do you take sugar?" I asked.

"Please," he said.

"It's over there," I replied, in clear violation of protocol.

His nostrils flared for a moment, and then he grinned, nastily.

"So you're upset," he said.

"You think?"

"Oh, Amber, you're priceless," he said.

"Do I amuse you father? Me, the unmannered Lady of the Fay? Are you proud of what I've become?" I crossed my arms. "Because everything I am, I owe to you."

He sat there, still grinning.

"You stick me in a human home with those horrible people," I continued. "And you want me to give up the one thing that seems to be helping me. What kind of father are you?"

"One who has made difficult decisions," he replied immediately.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"You speak badly of your foster parents, but look at all they've given you. You are a daughter of the Fay, and will therefore command the normal powers of the faerie. But you've had a human life, too." He reached over and retrieved the sugar.

"The humans have their glamours as well," he continued. "Look at you. You put on airs of self-sufficiency. You act like you don't need anything or anyone. You have emotional defenses that most faeries would envy. The Fog Lord would never get close to hurting you. And you're a scrapper, Amber. You know how to wound people. You'd take out his throat."

This was the most honest moment I'd ever had with him. And I don't think I really knew how to process what I was hearing. My father kept speaking.

"I originally got the idea from the British Empire, you see. Absent fathers. Stiff upper lips. And they raised the armies and the generals who have stormed into Africa, and India, and the Americas. The humans have a hardness to them that we have never had. An ability to block out things that are inconvenient."

He paused to sip his tea fussily. "As a culture, the Fay don't change much. We're mired in customs that are centuries old, and our petty rivalries are equally ancient. We need a new breed, Amber, and the first of that breed had to be reared in the human world."

I opened my mouth. My brain tried to catch up—tried to figure out what it was that I wanted to say. "Lynn says that people need affection," was all I managed.

"That woman will make you weak," he said. "And we need you strong." He drained his cup and stood up. He picked up his gloves and helmet and turned toward the hall.

"Father?" I said weakly. Pleadingly.

He stood there a moment, facing away from me. I could see his hesitation. Then he straightened his back and put on his helmet. "I commend you on the tea, Amber," he said. "Quite a tasty infusion. Good morning to you." Then he swooshed his riding crop into place

under his arm, and headed, militarily, for the closet.

• • •

"I've had some rather... confusing news."

"Oh?" Lynn replied.

"I've discovered that my father abandoned me here, on purpose."

"You said it was to protect you from your family's enemies."

"No. It was all part of some horrible socialization plan. My father left me here to toughen me up."

"And how do you feel about that?" she asked.

I hesitated. "Good," I said.

"Good?" Lynn repeated.

"Yeah. I mean, it's okay, see? It wasn't neglect. He was thinking about my best interests." I remembered how my father looked, in that moment of hesitation. He didn't have what I have; he couldn't really conceal all of the conflicted emotions behind his choices. I knew, in that moment, why he stayed away.

Lynn frowned, and thought for a moment. "Do you want to know what I think?" she asked. I said nothing and she continued. "There comes a point in the therapy process when the emotional walls start to come down. And that's scary. Suddenly, you feel vulnerable, and you look back on those walls and mistakenly think that they were a form of strength. But they're just an illusion of strength."

An illusion of strength, I thought, and I knew she didn't understand. Couldn't understand glamour. And for once, I knew what my father wanted of me, and I wasn't about to disappoint him.

This wasn't going to be easy; I wasn't very good at rewrites.

"I'm not going to be coming here, any more," I said. "And it's important that you not remember anything that I've told you about the Fay. It would be better if you remembered me as an annoyingly old-fashioned housewife who has been seeing you to deal with some banal dissatisfaction in life."

Lynn looked confused. Disoriented. She shook her head, and finally said, "I'm sorry—what did you say?"

I was already wearing the new glamour. "Oh, just that I won't be able to come here any more, dear. John needs his dinner on the table, doncha know." •

Three Ways to See the Sky

Evan Hazenburg

1: Right-side up

By December, this lake is an angry god
trying to break the back of our ship
with a punishment of waves.

The midnight watch is over
and we stagger like drunkards on a heaving sea
hands in pockets, scarves over noses, hats down to eyebrows
cursing and freezing and hungry.
The galley in the afterhouse seduces us
across the icy deck in moonlight.
The ship pounds down into troughs,
hammers up against crests;
our knees buckle to gravity.

Sprawled between the hatches in a windless space
there is a sudden moment of stillness.
The flat of my back is cold against frozen steel
and the sky yawns wide above me—
uncaring Orion, utterly without pity.

2: Upside-down

The galaxy is like glass tonight,
barely a ripple between the stars.

The bowl of night opens with a sound like silk
and I navigate by instinct, suspended
over a sunken forest of reed and rock.

Cassiopeia to Cepheus is a quick stroke.

The paddle dips, creates a black hole
that sucks stars into a tight eddy of orbit
before dissipating.

The rhythms of this summer
are the births and deaths of stars.

3: Inside-out

This blizzard is a devastating act of creation.
The world is suffocated for days,
muted and sullen and still as dusk.

It is unending and beautiful and terrifying.
Every morning I count cans of soup,
melt pans of snow on the stove
and ration the logs dry enough to burn.
Hibernation is a solemn chore this far north.

At night I venture outside
to study the blight of clouds.
These columns of winter are tireless,
stretched from the top of the sky to the ground
blotting out the river and the trees
and the light from the porch.

I am isolated in a storm of noiseless fury,
deprived of every sense but one,
this relentless spinning movement that has swallowed me.

It is hard to tell if I am stationary
or rushing through the universe at the speed of light,
exhilarated and breathless from the vacuum cold. •

They saw me as a specialist because of my age. I just saw myself as more comfortable with things I could understand.

Graveyard Orbit

Jon Martin Watts

The derelict station was a first magnitude eyesore, or so most people said. I thought she had a rugged, functional kind of beauty. She was crafted from real metal alloys, held together with actual bolts and rivets, and *welded*. Remember welding? As I approached, I imagined her birth, as she swarmed with crews of dark-visored riggers hunched over white hot electrical arcs that sputtered silently in the vacuum. She wasn't grown in any biogenic chamber, cut loose with a chemical switch, nor glued together with enzyme gels. This was a real spacecraft, old stuff, a sight for my sore eyes. Sunlight flashed from her battered solar panels as the big contraption tumbled slowly. A few klicks out, I keyed my mike and checked in with Control.

"Hey Pinson, I can see Heaven, and I'm going in."

"Roger that, Jim. You may enter when ready. We'll see you back here on Wednesday for your retirement bash, old timer. Control out."

I timed the rendezvous for just after sunrise. In darkness she would be utterly invisible; her navigation lights had long since failed. A night side docking wouldn't have been a problem for the SC60 Rhinoceros, even with a dead thruster or two. But this was our last trip together; and I wanted to be a full participant. Unlike my ship however, if I wanted to approach an object in space, I had to be able to see it.

I switched off the rendezvous radar and brought the Rhino in manually, one little squirt of hydrazine at a time. Matching the peculiar

tumbling by hand and eye alone takes a feat of concentration most people can't imagine, let alone perform. For me, the spatial gymnastics were second nature, the mental math, more or less intuitive. There aren't many people left who can do what I was doing that day. Heaven was in daylight for forty-five minutes at a time. I had to get in before nightfall, or else back away and wait. Hovering a few feet away from the station in darkness would be to invite disaster. I could just punch a couple of buttons and give control back to the ship. But I didn't want to do that. Not this time anyway. I got lined up with twenty minutes to spare. The contact was by the book, firm and precise. The old tug rang like a bell as the capture latches clanged shut. With a brief hiss, sixteen pneumatic pistons pulled the two vessels into hard dock. The old tug's airlock was mated to one of Heaven's, right by the central hub.

I began cycling through the locks into the station. The doors to the Rhino's cramped airlock slid smoothly sideways, powered by hidden servos. Heaven's outer hatch swung inward easily, accompanied by a little rush of air. I floated into the spacious chamber and pulled a pen-light from my sleeve pocket to inspect the gauges. On the other side of the door, Heaven still held her atmosphere, but the pressure was low. I'd expected that, and had put on an oxygen mask during the approach, to purge the nitrogen from my blood. That far from help, the last thing you need is a case of the bends. It wasn't so low that I'd need to go back and put on my bulky suit, so I continued in my breathing set and coveralls. The station was completely powered down. I dogged the outer hatch shut by hand and cracked open the relief valve. My ears popped repeatedly, and I yawned to ease the pain in my eardrums as the pressure in the lock fell to the level inside the station. I swung open the inner hatch, and discovered that the air was not just thin, but icy-cold too. The exhaust valves on my mask blew out twin streams of vapour with each exhalation. I pulled a watch cap and a pair of woolen gloves from my pockets, and put them on. Heaven was a mess. In the darkness my flashlight beam picked out junk floating in the hub: tools, articles of clothing, papers, even a small teddy bear. I plucked the toy from the air and thrust it into a pocket as a souvenir.

The Company called me a salvage pilot. It was a euphemism. I always figured salvage was about saving stuff, so it could be used somehow. All they really let me do by the end of my 'salvage' career was discard things. So it was with the old Heaven Hotel. Valcorp sent me over to

decommission her. It was my final mission before being pensioned off. Mostly, the company gave me the old nuts 'n' bolts hardware to deal with. They saw me as a specialist, because of my age. I just saw myself as more comfortable with things I could understand. Young guys don't have a feel for fifty year old space junk. I grew old with it. It's the new, creepy, organic shit, I don't get. I firmly believe that spacecraft should be the children of engineers, not gardeners.

I floated through the hub section, looking for the systems controls. When I found the power panel, the gauges showed the reserve batteries still holding some amps. I didn't understand how that was even possible. But I just shrugged to myself and put them to work, supplying minimal power to the station's systems. I had expected them to be completely dead, and had been ready to run a cable from the Rhino to charge them. The emergency lights cut in, flickered a few times, and then glowed steadily. I got some fans running to circulate the cold, stagnant air, and started to work on controlling the station's attitude. Once I got the tumbling stopped, I found I could still orient a couple of the pitted solar panels to track the sun. They weren't working at anything like their rated efficiency, but they still gave me enough power to run the heaters at full blast, work the atmosphere cycler, and start getting the place pressured up.

While I waited for the temperature to rise a little, I floated back into the tug and shucked off the oxygen mask. I picked up the thick wad of procedures for safeing the station, and started to leaf through it. The mission rationale was simple. Abandoned in place, Heaven's low orbit would decay within a few months and she would enter the atmosphere. Heaven was far too massive for this to be a safe method of disposal. She would have to be moved upstairs, where she would become someone else's problem at some undefined time in the future. The procedures called for a gentle twenty five minute burn of the docked tug's propulsion system. In about twelve hours, the change in orbital velocity would bring both spacecraft into a near circular track at an altitude several hundred klicks above that used by geosynchronous satellites, in the so-called 'graveyard orbit'.

I punched in the burn data and sat back to eat lunch as the tug's engines rumbled and shook. I loved that old ship. The Rhino was simple, tough and reliable. There were no turbopumps or ignition system. Simple helium pressure blows the hypergolic propellants into the big combustion chamber, they ignite on contact and right away you feel a

big push in the behind. The idea is well over a century old. It was first used by the Nazis to power rocket propelled fighter planes, and later to land the first men on the moon. If something works, don't change it; that's my philosophy. I flew that Rhino for more than forty years and she never once failed to fire. When the burn was complete, I went back into the station and began to move methodically from room to room with the checklist, disarming this or that system and looking for anything likely to cause an explosion. Up there in the graveyard orbit, she was supposed to remain just a single large piece of space junk, not a storm of tangential debris.

Inside, the Heaven Hotel was more like an untidy submarine, if the truth be told, than a hotel. In the dim emergency lighting, the corridors seemed narrow and low. The walls were festooned with pipes and wires. The Heaven wore her plumbing inside out. The "staterooms" were little more than cubicles where a couple of visitors could join the hundred mile high club, or squeeze into sleep restraints and snatch some zees. I began collecting up the fire extinguishers and stuffing them into an elastic net which I pushed in front of me as I floated along the cramped hallway.

According to the checklist, I needed to locate the station's central visitor lounge, and disable some equipment in that area. The Van Allen lounge was by far the biggest open space on the entire platform. The equipment in question was cryptically identified as "Toshiba Model AN-T SU 44 Mobile Communications/Utility Device – Beta Test Unit." I wasn't familiar with the designation, and a brief search didn't reveal any communications gear. Since it was a mobile device I figured someone must have moved it. Not knowing exactly what I was looking for, I thumbed through my copy of the manifest in search of a clue. AN-T SU 44 was described as a "production prototype autonomous personnel interface system—anthropoid configuration. Date of Manufacture 08/20/2023"—an antique talking robot. I laughed out loud, in spite of my irritation at not finding it. No doubt it was some kind of mechanical bartender, I figured. It was probably programmed with two thousand cocktail recipes, and a selection of corny jokes, to be told in a Stephen Hawking accent. Thinking I'd find it adrift in some odd corner, I shrugged and went back to my tour of the abandoned station.

Although I'd never been there before, I have to admit that I felt a certain jolt of nostalgia at saying goodbye to the old Heaven Hotel. As I floated down the dingy hallways, I imagined them bustling with excited,

queasy tourists, newly arrived from Earth. Passing a barf bag dispenser mounted on a corridor wall, I pulled out one of the neatly monogrammed paper pouches and tucked it into my pocket as another souvenir. The last of those guests had long since left, of course, followed by the redundant hotel staff. The one and only Heaven Hotel was a unique travel destination in its time, the must-see place for the millionaire space tourist. For forty years it gleamed and glistened in low Earth orbit. Its highly inclined ground track took it over most of the planet's surface between 60 degrees North and 60 degrees South latitude at an altitude of around 240 kilometers. At one time or another it over flew virtually every major city on the planet. As the Hotel grew in size, it grew brighter as seen from Earth. Eventually it exceeded even Sirius in magnitude. The glorious "Heaven" beckoned to those who could possibly afford to visit her, and mocked those who could not.

Eventually, Heaven's popularity among the super-rich began to wane. Especially after newer, larger space stations were built. The new stations had spin-induced artificial gravity, huge glass domes housing conservatories with string quartets, and even areas where human powered flight was possible with strap-on wings. Eventually, the tourists could take trips out to the Moon and go crater-hopping in pressurized 'bubble' cars. The poor old Heaven fell into decline as discerning space travelers began to deride her for no more than what she actually was: a bunch of recycled fuel tanks lashed together.

Even that day, when I first entered Heaven, I saw her as more than that. She wasn't fashionable or fancy, but she was solid. Her engineering design was primitive, but reliable and safe. Her systems were idiosyncratic, but possessed multiple redundancies. In my opinion what she lacked in grace she more than made up for in elegance. As I said, I feel at home with the old stuff. One day, I thought, I should buy a place like that and use it as a better-than-average retirement home for old spacers like me. Still, my job was to bury her not to praise her, so I kept on with the decommissioning chores.

An hour later, I'd circled the outer ring of the hotel without seeing the robot. As I arrived back at the Van Allen Lounge, I felt a familiar twitching in my finger ends. So I thought I'd drop in and see if the crew had left anything drinkable behind. As I drifted through the door, a blonde in a powder blue jumpsuit greeted me from behind the bar at the far end.

"Hello love!" said the blonde, cheerily. "Fancy a drink?" I'd expected something a bit more like the tin man from Oz, garnished with a bow tie perhaps; but at least I'd found the missing machine.

"I've been looking for you," I replied. "You must be the AN-T SU unit."

"That's me, Flower", she said. "Most people around here call me Auntie Sue." The robot gestured to a vacant bar stool (they were all vacant of course). I floated over and hooked my toes under the footrest.

"There *are* no people around here," I observed, dryly.

The unit handed me a bulb of amber fluid. "Jack Daniels," it announced. "From the very last bottle. I suppose I've been saving it for you."

"Thanks," I muttered automatically, taking the drink. One small word, but I could hardly believe I had said it. I never saw the point in wasting social graces on a mechanism. The Rhino's computer had a speech interface, but I didn't feel the need to say please and thank you to it. And that ship was probably the best friend I ever had. The last thing I really wanted was to engage the robot in conversation. Technically, it seemed to be doing a passable job of impersonating a human being. Though I knew it was anthropomorphic, I resented the machine for resembling an attractive woman. Still, *she* had just served me my usual, without even asking, and I was curious.

"Why *this* drink?" I asked.

"Oh, I don't know, Ducky," she gushed, in a synthetic English accent, "you just looked like a *Jack* kind of bloke to me." The robot beamed a big smile and one eye opened and shut stiffly, in what I took to be a wink.

I looked her squarely in the face for the first time. Her smile was made all the more bizarre by the rent in the membrane of the left cheek that exposed some of the facial servos, and the fact that the two elements of her binocular visual system didn't track in the same direction.

"I'm decommissioning the hotel," I told her. "And I'm decommissioning you too, Auntie Sue," I added almost apologetically. I hardly noticed that I'd begun to use the robot's own self-referent.

"Oh, I expected that. And don't worry; I don't mind a bit, dear."

I hadn't worried. But I had wondered if her program would try to resist deactivation. She reached under the bar and drew out a yellowing, dog-eared tome. "You're going to need this."

I took the proffered document. It was the AN-T SU series *Operations and Maintenance Handbook*. The robot squeezed another J.D.

from the plastic bottle and sat quietly cross-legged on a stool examining her fingernails, while I skimmed the manual. Once in a while I sneaked a glance at the waiting machine. When she wasn't actively engaged in conversation, Auntie Sue's visage ceased its bold animation and took on a relaxed, almost vacant aspect. It seemed as though a different subroutine had kicked in. It was one that made her seem superficially human, even in repose. Every so often, the robot would shift position slightly, make a little "ahem" sound, or reach inside the neck of the blue flight suit and tug discretely at a bra strap. As the second drink hit home, I began to find this programmed caricature of a woman convincing visually, if not intellectually.

Sue was to be deactivated and left *in situ* aboard the hotel as it was moved up to the graveyard orbit. She was considered to be just another piece of obsolete junk. Company engineers felt it was too dangerous to attempt to deorbit her in one of the cranky entry pods because of the radiation hazard she posed in the event of an accident. She simply wouldn't fit in on Earth anyway, I thought. I flipped to the section of her manual that dealt with power systems. Sue was powered by a radioisotope thermoelectric generator. That is to say her electrical power was provided by the spontaneous decay of radioactive plutonium. The RTG was similar, in principle to those that had powered everything from Apollo lunar experiments to interplanetary probes. Did she glow in the dark? No. The generator was well shielded with lead and depleted uranium. That was probably one reason why Sue came to serve in a microgravity environment. Despite her trim, almost petite, frame she massed nearly three hundred kilograms, most of it heavy anti-radiation shielding. On Earth she would leave dents in ordinary floor surfaces.

The wall-eyed robot served me another drink and moved up to an adjacent seat, pressing a warm thigh up against mine. It wasn't unpleasant at all. I moved on to "Deactivation Procedures". The trick was to open a little port in the front of her chest cavity, withdraw the damping rod stored there and reinsert it into the adjacent plutonium core, killing the reaction. This would place the unit into standby mode, at least until the damper got pulled out again. The parallel with slaying a vampire was inescapable, and I was getting drunk...

The mechanical space vampire nibbled gently at my neck, jerking me back into a semblance of alertness. I took another shot of liquor. All of a sudden she seemed very close. She had unzipped the top of

her jumpsuit quite a bit I noticed, revealing a pink lacy cleavage. I leaned over for a closer look at her thorax. Directly beneath the clasp of her front fastening bra I could make out the cover of the power port, like a flesh-coloured rectangular Band-Aid. I reached in to try to pry up the cover with a fingernail.

"Cheeky monkey," she giggled, slapping my hand away playfully, "we hardly even know each other!" I realized, with quite illogical embarrassment, that she'd thought I was trying to grope her. I almost stammered out an apologetic explanation, but thought better of it. She zippered up her suit, just a little, and got up to fetch another drink. "Hey Jack," she said, "I see you've got one of the old Rhinos docked at the hub. Can I take her for a spin?"

"No," I responded possessively, as she sat down again. "And it's Jim, not Jack. Jim Nolan actually." To my own surprise, I offered my hand, which she shook with a firm, warm grip.

"You're Jack, to me. It's a bar name, silly. I don't care what other people call you." She poked me gently in the shoulder and chuckled quietly. "Well, if you won't let me fly your ship, why don't you just take me with you back to Sagan-Valhalla. I've always wanted to see what it's like."

As she said the hated name I grimaced. Still, ValCorp politics wasn't the issue here. Interestingly, the robot seemed to be waffling on the matter of deactivation. Most people believe robots have to do what they're told, even if it means their own destruction. They also naively believe robots aren't allowed to hurt people. Long before robots actually existed, a fantasy writer named Asimov set down such rules for their behaviour. As far as I know, robots do exactly what they are programmed to do, whatever that may be. I wondered what Sue's program was driving towards. I decided to let the interaction play out.

"No. They can't have atomics on board," I explained. "They won't even let you enter."

"Well maybe I can go in disguise." With a small flourish she produced a pair of reflective aviator-style sunglasses from her pocket and pushed them onto her face. She looked a little more symmetrical with the defective optics obscured.

"I don't think so. Sorry." With a pout (yes I said a pout), she whipped off the shades and let them float away. I liked her face better without them, wonky peeper notwithstanding. Her good eye zoomed to the diagram on the open page in front of me.

"Are you really going to do that to me, darling?"

"Yes..." I would have done it to her there and then, but that kind of procedure takes a steady hand and a clear eye. "First thing in the morning."

It was a damn shame to have to do such a job, I decided. To discard a pretty functional robot that was nearly as old as me. Annoying as she was, Auntie Sue was a great, durable piece of equipment. Engineers knew how to design things once. She had much more personality than the dour biogenic creatures that shuffle out of ValCorp's factories nowadays. Sue was old gear, from the time when stuff worked and you could rely on it. Just like the Rhino. Just like the Heaven Hotel. Just like me.

I recalled Pinson's last comment from Control. A few more days and they would discard me too.

"Oh well. It's for the best, I suppose," she sighed. For a moment, Auntie Sue looked pensive, if you can imagine that in a mechanical. Then she switched modes again. She batted her eyelids at me. The one over the damaged eye didn't bat properly. It just twitched. The effect was slightly unsettling. "You get any lately, love?" she whispered, placing a hand on my knee. "Why don't you come back to my cabin for a nightcap? I can show you some of the other features of the AN-T SU series." She flipped to Chapter 30 of the manual. It had some very different diagrams.

I was drunk. But I didn't think I was *that* drunk. I couldn't recall how many I'd had, but maybe it was more than usual. Or maybe she'd been spiking them. A ploy to seduce me, obviously, I thought hazily. "Look, Auntie Sue, or whatever you want to call yourself." I was slurring my words. "You are, without any doubt, the most human-like robot I've ever met. I've never seen a more impressive ass—sembly of mechanical parts. But I've never had sex with a machine, and I'm certainly not going to sleep with a nuclear whore!"

As I closed my eyes and drifted from my bar stool, I felt a passing pang of remorse for my cruel remark. The robot was up to something; that was clear. I knew I should fight the drowsiness that overwhelmed me, but I just couldn't. Instead, I slept.

• • •

When you're hanging on the outside of a derelict space station on the night side of the planet, with the ocean crawling by at 18,000 miles

per hour, you can't see your hand in front of your face. You can, however, see that the stars are not just twinkling white points, but rather steadily burning dots of blue and red and gold and... There aren't too many perks in being an orbital salvage engineer; but one, for me, is the feeling of hurtling through a void with nothing but fabric between me and a quick, but no doubt uncomfortable, death. I'm just waiting there in the blackness, listening to the gentle hiss of my oxygen regulator and the whirr of the coolant pump in the suit, watching the phosphorescent trails of ships on the dark ocean below. Waiting for sunrise.

The sun comes up and I'm still hanging on the outside of a piece of space junk, only now there's a blonde in a pink bra and panties hanging beside me, unclipping my safety line from the handrail and laughing silently in the vacuum. Smiling, she pries my gloved hands from the rail and pushes me gently away...

• • •

I woke with a start and a rush of vertigo; the beginnings of a pretty good hangover. I was tucked into a sleep restraint in one of the tiny "staterooms". The little teddy bear was tucked in beside me. I was alone, and still dressed. That, at least, was something of a relief. I checked the time. Heaven should be in the graveyard orbit. I peered through the tiny porthole over to the docking hub. The Rhino was gone!

I cursed my stupidity for relaxing in the presence of a condemned robot. She'd tried to seduce her way out of trouble, probably slipped me a Mickey Finn, and now she had taken my only means of leaving Heaven. As I kicked my way along the corridors to the observation bubble, I grudgingly admitted to myself that the girl had talent. Still, I was surplus too; and if I couldn't get the ship back, I was stranded. I knew it was unlikely that another would be sent for me. That's just the way things are now. Looking through the transparent dome, I could see the Rhino's strobe flashing a few klicks away. I swung the pole-mounted binoculars in her direction and saw she was carrying something in the big manipulator arms. I couldn't tell what it was, but after a few moments it was clear she was coming in, fast. Too fast!

I scrambled out of the bubble and down to the airlock complex. I picked up a mike and scanned for the Rhino's open channel. "Sue!" I screamed. "Are you crazy? You keep coming in at that rate and we're

both in trouble."

"Sorry Jack, love," Sue's voice crackled over the hiss of the carrier wave. "It's been a while since I've flown."

"Okay Sue. Look at the overhead navigation panel. Just push the buttons marked 'RV RADAR', 'AUTODOCK' and 'PROCEED', in that order. Can you do that?"

"And let the ship have all the fun? Not blooming likely! Don't worry. I think I'm getting the hang of it." With that, she spun the Rhino through one hundred and eighty degrees, and with a long blast of the jets, pulled to a perfect stop, just about three metres from the airlock.

"I think you and me need to have a little talk, Jack." I was beginning to detect some subtle inflection in her voice. No question about it, she was agitated.

"It's Jim remember," I replied. "Jack is a drink."

"Details, Jack, details," she said curtly "Anyhow you are what you drink, I always say."

"Okay, whatever," I said. "Just bring her in for a soft dock."

"Just a minute Jack," she continued. "I may be just a 'nuclear whore' to you..." (I cringed at the epithet I'd used the night before) "But this little *atomic bombshell* has your ship and a mind of her own. So now you have to listen to what she says. All right, love?"

I listened.

"Jack, you can learn a lot being a barmaid. Just because I'm a robot doesn't mean I can't read people. You're as obsolete as I am. I checked the Rhino's VOX transcript. They're retiring you pretty soon aren't they? I know what that means, Jack. You'll be stuck in some fetid swamp in Sagan-Valhalla, they'll suck your bank account dry, and you'll end up believing they're doing you a favour. It's safe. But that's surely the best thing you can say about it. I know what's happening, Jack. Nobody gives a damn about the old stuff any more. And that includes people."

She had it pretty much right. I couldn't bring myself to speak, for fear my voice would crack.

"Look, Jack. I know more about the old stuff than you think. I also know this graveyard orbit is full of it. I'm thinking there's a way out of this situation. We can find anything we need here. Let's just cobble some of this junk together and push off to some place far away."

She was crazy. But my own wheels were beginning to turn in synch

with hers.

"Look what I've got!" I could see her through the viewport, gesturing at the dull metal cylinder the Rhino was holding.

"Four thousand kilos of liquid oxygen! I took it off an old research platform orbiting about fifty klicks away. How long would it take you to breathe all that, Jack? Longer than you've got, I'll wager. There are rocket motors out here, fuels, gases, water, batteries. Oh, and I found another good thing, love. We're out of Jack Daniels, but we still have a one-man lifetime supply of Jim Beam."

I thought furiously, about selling the Rhino to finance a retirement hovel in a squalid dump like Sagan-Valhalla. It was that or run away to deep space with a cross-eyed robot barmaid. I considered her offer. Finally I saw the clincher. "If I drink the Jim Beam, will you start calling me by my proper name?"

"Whatever you say, Jack, love."

"Come on in, Sue," I said at last. "We've got some cobbling to do."

Auntie Sue and I robbed the graveyard, and bolted and welded for a month or more. We nursed Heaven's aeroponic garden back to life, with the help of some of the forty years of freeze-dried bathroom waste. Sue made a pretty decent space rigger. She worked outside in her pink underwear, because it freaked me out, like a drug-induced nightmare come true. Of course, she also did it just because no one else could. In the evenings, when my finger ends began to twitch, I drank Jim Beam, and she never showed me Chapter 30 of the manual again.

One day, after I had enjoyed a light lunch of homegrown salad and mung beans, while Sue looked on (she could chew, but afterwards had to spit), we lit up a freshly recharged Cerberus inertial driver and the Earth grew smaller. As the flame died and the rocket drifted away, we watched from the observation bubble.

"Would you please kiss me, Jim?" she asked.

"Maybe," I replied, producing a small screwdriver. "But first I'm gonna fix that eye." •

I wanted to keep checking on her,
glance back and make sure her
armour was secure, but my team
would've been suspicious.

Coolies

Suzanne Church

I had the shakes, brought on by the adrenaline of the upcoming salv. Coolies are the worst of the best and I was their leader.

A newbie sat at our table in the mess tent—a woman. She wore a tough-as-stainless face, but everybody lost it the first time out. She'd be no different.

I sat beside her, shoving my stubble-lined cheek in her direction.

She glanced at my shaking hands, so I kept them moving, shovelling eggs like they tasted better than sawdust. She looked no more than eighteen with her nearly-bald crew cut. And her eyes, they reminded me of something.

I asked, "What's your name?"

"Daxie."

Shit. The picture. "Doesn't sound like a real name," I said.

"And you are?"

"Marvin. But you can call me Sergeant." Either she didn't know, or she hid her emotions well.

"I heard Georgopoulos call you Pops," she said. "Must be a story there."

"You don't know the half of it. Come back alive with a full cooler and I'll tell you the first chapter."

I swallowed hard. Part of me wanted to grab her by the shoulders

and scream at her to run as far from the war as she could. To beg a transfer before she shoved her hands into someone's insides to search for whatever was worth salvaging.

Damn her mother and damn the deal. A picture a year. No contact. I wasn't allowed to be her father. Not when I chose a cooler over love. My one chance to make a difference in her life fell into my lap and all I could do was eat my lousy eggs.

"You're Needles' daughter, aren't you?"

She nodded. "How d'you know my mom?"

I stared at her eyes, green as a new pair of fatigues, and looked for an excuse to break my promise.

"I..." More eggs. "She sews our inventory back onto people."

I expected her to flinch. To at least *hate* me for degrading her mother's job into that of the butcher's aid. But she *smiled*. That was the opening; the moment when I should've capitalized on her pride or love or whatever the hell she felt for her mom. It hung there, like snot on the tip of your nose in the dead of winter; and while my stomach churned my crappy eggs into a hell sandwich, I tried to string together a few noble words. *Don't follow me. I'm your dad. This job is evil.* But as the silence stretched between us, my courage fell by the wayside, catching an express train along with my dignity and honour. I abandoned my food, grunted a parting word, and headed for the locker room.

My second-in-command, Master Corporal Renault, a.k.a. Snowpick, had already donned half his armour. The albino leaned on my locker while he reached down to tighten his boot. When he heard me approach, he straightened and said, "Hey, Marv. What do the scum-rics have planned this morning?"

"They've been hauling equipment from Sunburst to Sweetgrass." I tightened my chest plate, snapping the armour with a satisfying click, eyeing the red maple leaf that had faded onto the camo background. I wasn't much of a father, but at least I loved my country. "They're pushing most of the Montana force through Alberta, right into our lap."

"Lucky us." He took off his wedding ring and placed it on the hook attached to his locker door. His fingers paused, like he was touching his wife's lips.

I grabbed my helmet and pulled the picture out of the inner mesh, holding it out for Snowpick. Daxie smiled for the camera with the same happy face she'd shown me in the mess hall. Except she had a full head

of beautiful red hair. I bet Needles shot it; couldn't have been more than a year ago, but Daxie had blossomed since then. Into a woman.

"Seen our newest member?"

He pressed his lips together and nodded. "D'she know?"

I nestled the image back into the mesh. "Not as far as I can tell. I can't believe Needles would let her own flesh—"

"I bet the doc doesn't have a clue. Teenagers don't tell jack to their parents. Mine don't." He closed his locker. "Your call, Mary; but if I was you, I'd tell her the truth."

"Truth's not my best color. Seems it's more the scrambled-eggs-shade."

I expected him to argue the point, but he stared at me. Fatherhood was a tight-knit club, and Snowpick had sent me an invitation to the party. I bit my lip, composing a speech for my only child that wouldn't make me seem like a bastard.

Snowpick checked his watch then grabbed his pack. "See you in the IFV."

"Yeah."

• • •

Daxie stood outside the Infantry Fighting Vehicle, looking like she needed someone to tell her what to do. I cleared my throat.

She straightened to parade attention.

"Hey, listen. I've got to tell you something."

"Last words of advice?" She smiled. "Because the guys have all been giving—"

"Stay behind."

"Excuse me, Sergeant?"

"Don't get on the IFV."

"Why the hell not?"

"Because your mother... I mean, I'm..."

Snowpick rapped Daxie on the back and said, "Let's go, newbie."

"But the sergeant—"

"Never mind," I said. "Follow me."

• • •

The IFV would drop us next to the fire line. Corporal Weber ran the gun on top. The Section called him Teflon because enemy ammo

never stuck.

Our coolers waited inside. I opened my beat-up, red baby, checking for ice. Snowpick had filled it. I snapped the lid back down, bungeed it closed, and headed for the driver's seat.

Driving kept my mind off our newbie and her imminent initiation into iced combat. I wanted to keep checking on her, glance back and make sure her armour was secure, but my team would've been suspicious. Snowpick was the only man I had ever trusted with my dark little secret. Besides, the guys were all over her, spewing their last minute words of wisdom before the action.

As we approached the fire line, I said, "Five minutes, people. Checklist and tie-down."

Snowpick leaned against the back of my seat. "Think we'll ever get the stem cell factories back online?"

I shook my head. "The Americans bomb them faster than we can build them. One day they might shove their self-righteous crosses so far up their asses that they'll lobotomize themselves. In the meantime, we need parts to patch up our wounded."

Daxie moved up beside him, and said, "Which one's mine?"

"Newbies get black." Snowpick pointed at the dented one near the front of the IFV. She nestled up to it, like it held the secret to eternal life. Her reaction reassured me. The coolies who embrace their equipment live longer.

Gunfire staccatoed outside. I slammed the brakes and radioed Teflon to lay down suppression fire. I rechecked my armour. Clamps secure, helmet strapped on. Game time. When the back door opened, we filed out; Snowpick on point and Daxie in front of me.

"Pro patria!" I shouted.

"Pro patria!" they all responded.

We scattered, a cooler dragging behind each one of us on a tether. Gunfire erupted to our right. Daxie flinched, like she'd forgotten every minute of basic training. My gut wrenched into a knot.

Another exchange of fire ripped through the air further west of us. She ducked below her cooler. At least she had survival instincts.

A shell hit northeast of us. I took cover. My cooler shook with the pounding of another three shells. Despite the twitch in my chest telling me to run, I headed towards the last bombardment. Noise marked the wounded. By the time the ringing quieted in my ears, I was

five hundred meters to Daxie's left and hoping she could handle herself.

Bravo Section drew fire in bursts, returning in the pause between reloads. I dropped behind my cooler, and waited for the party to break.

After catching a breath that reeked of gunfire and burnt hair, I hurried for the edge of the crater and surveyed the damage. The shell had taken a leg off one soldier and an arm off another. The armless one's wound squirted in regular pulses with her heart. A medic jumped down into the hole with me. He covered the woman's wound with shrink wrap. Her skin pinked up. No orgs for me.

The leg guy had a chunk of shrapnel in his head and slow ooze out the wound. A good harvest. While Bravo Section started another assault, I grabbed the dead guy's liver, kidneys, heart, lungs, spleen, and GI tract. His eyes looked cloudy so I left them behind. The docs had been asking for throats and cords lately, so I sliced them free of his neck and moved on.

When the medic hopped back onto the field, I headed northeast toward a crater big enough to eat an IFV. I saw Daxie's cooler at the rim, with the lid up. She might as well paint a big target on her ass.

I raced for the rim as RPGs flew in my direction. One dive and my cooler slung in beside me in the hole.

I grabbed Daxie's arm and shouted, "Get your cooler out of sight."

She pulled on her bungee and the black container skidded into the crater beside her. I could tell from the bounce it was empty.

"What about him?" I pointed at a guy cut in half near point zero. "You could grab his intestines, they're probably still good."

She shook her head. "His temp's too low for a viable salvage."

"You temped his liver? You could've had his colon and femoral artery by then."

"I wanted to be sure."

I shook my head. "No time."

She looked wounded, like I'd given her an F on her term paper.

"Daxie?"

"Yeah, Sarge?"

"This is the worst time, but if I don't, well... I'm your father."

Before her reaction seeped into her face, I turned toward the high-pitched whine of an incoming.

I heard her say, "My what?"

I started crawling for the rim, trunk down, with my cooler between

me and danger. I turned to her. She had her ass in the air and looked as stunned as a doe.

"Get down!" I said.

She flattened against the dirt. As she did, my one and only pang of fatherly instinct flooded me. *Protect her.* I rolled onto my back, my arms reaching to pull my cooler up over both of us. But before I could cover her, the whine turned to a screech.

I saw the shell a fraction of a second before it hit. I knew better than to watch ordnance, but this one called to me, like it had my number tattooed on its ugly brass head. Part of me wanted to witness the end, the chunk of chemicals and metal that would erase my existence from this stink-hole world. The weird part was that I wanted to live the moment—every slice and rupture in perfect detail—to experience the nirvana of total shut-down. My chance to suffer the moment when a body switches from human to salvage.

I got my wish.

• • •

Snowpick dragged my cooler behind his own. I reached out to take control of my load, but only bumped into it. My hands were both severed, the stumps covered with shrink wrap pinked by blood.

Daxie lay all around me, her body in pieces; head here, abdomen there, a leg at the edge of my vision. Her arm bore a tattoo—symbols, like Asian and Arabic letters melded into images. Ferocity leapt from the surface, warning the timid to stay back. The fingers grabbed at my pant leg.

I tried to step away, but they had a good grip on me. "Please," I said.

The head rolled toward me. Empty, bleeding eye sockets stared back. "Dad?"

I woke, grasping at the over-bleached hospital sheets and straining against the mag-harness that held me down.

Bandages covered my eyes. I felt as though shards of hot glass had embedded themselves in my corneas while I slept. I forced one lid to open slightly under all the padding. The blackness didn't change. I touched the dressing, my fingers delicately searching for answers. The slight pressure on my eyeball brought a second layer of indescribable pain.

Someone entered the room, announced by a squish-squish of mud-crusted boots on a tiled floor.

"Who's there?" I said.

"Snowpick."

"Where am I?"

"Base Hospital."

I swallowed hard, my mouth suddenly drier than it had been a moment before. The image of my broken daughter still fresh in my mind, I asked, "Who'd we lose?"

"Half the fucking Section. Teflon bought it, vaporized. Not even a skin graft left for us to salv. Georgopoulos lost an arm at the shoulder and both legs, and Holling's gonna need a new spinal cord."

"What about Daxie?"

For a long while I listened to his breathing. He sounded like he'd sprinted behind the IFVs all the way from the front line. I'd salved my own people before. It was the worst part of the job, harder than the blank stares of the dead, harder than the mothers who'd grieve their children, and damned harder than RPGs crashing all around.

"Tell me!"

"She's gone. I salved her myself."

A shudder ripped straight through me. Fuck those American bastards and fuck this stupid war. I had told her the truth and lost her in the same moment.

"What'd you get?" Hating myself, I swallowed back the bile rising from my twisted insides. My own fucking daughter and all I could think to ask was the fucking butcher's bill.

He came close, grabbed my hand and pressed it against his arm. "You feel that?" he said.

"Yeah."

"That's her fucking blood. I had my arms buried in her chest, you heartless bastard. What kind of sick son-of-a-bitch are you?"

I pulled my hand away. "Damn it, I need to know."

With a calm I could never have managed, he said, "Heart, lungs, spleen, and pancreas."

He was holding it back, and we both knew why. I wouldn't be able to bear it coming from some doc, especially not Needles. I had to hear it from him. My second. My best friend. "Anything above the shoulders?"

"Yeah. She was O-Pos, just like her daddy. So I saved them for you. Sent them straight to Needles."

"They were green, weren't they?"

"Yeah," he said. "And you don't deserve them."

"Nobody ever does."

• • •

At dinner the same night, they cut my pork chop into bite-sized pieces. I couldn't imagine a worse insult for a guy who carved human flesh for a living.

The next morning, Snowpick arrived after breakfast. He said, "The bandages are coming off?"

I nodded. "I don't want my first vision to be your ugly face. Besides, shouldn't you be with the Section?"

"Both sides are waiting on ammo shipments, so you're stuck with me."

We allowed the silence to linger. Thinking is a sorry business, full of what-ifs and what-the-hells. I longed to avoid it, but what else could I do, locked down to my bed and blind?

The door opened, and I heard footsteps. As the person approached, I smelled the unmistakable scent of lilac mixed with disinfectant.

Why'd it have to be her? I sat there, fidgeting. I should have apologized, begged her forgiveness, but I couldn't bring myself to even say hello.

"Sit up," said Needles.

I did.

"Your synapses might not work right away. Your brain learned to process signals from a different pair of eyes."

Stone-cold clinical. I shouldn't have been surprised. "I trust you." I reached out for her hand.

Without another word, she snipped the gauze and tugged it free, one slow revolution at a time. Her hands trembled as they neared my eyes. I reached out and touched her fingers. She started, like I'd burned her. The bandages smelled ripe from my sweat. Then the soft pads pulled away one at a time.

I willed my eyes, no, *Daxie's* to work. Light crept through the pink flesh of my lids. They were glued shut; layers of crud had oozed out and hardened my lashes into a crusty mud bank.

Needles pressed a soggy cloth against my face.

The blood-tinged light turned to darkness once more. I pushed the wetness into my lashes, and the pus softened. Then pulled the cloth away.

"Open your eyes," said Snowpick.

I tugged my lids apart. Bright light forced them shut and I heard bubbling-screechy sounds in my head. I coerced my eyes open again. The bright blue eyes of my ex-lover-turned-saviour stared at me.

"How many fingers?" she said.

"Three."

She forced one lid wide open, then the other, burning me with her bright flashlight of pain to get a good long look.

"What's the verdict, doc?"

"I never wanted Daxie to know you; figured she was better off without a father. The next thing I know, I'm holding the pieces of half your squad. They didn't even tell me. I was sewing her eyes into you and they didn't—"

"I'm sorry," I said, crying. At least the tear ducts worked.

"She told me she was taking a year off before university to have fun. Fun, for fuck's sake." She kicked the bed, shaking it and me. "She was in your Section, your command, Marv. Why the hell didn't you stop her?"

"You forbade me to—"

"You're the sergeant! It's your job to keep the newbies safe. She wasn't ready and you damn well knew it." Needles raised her hand to slap me. "God damn it, Marv. If I wasn't afraid of wrecking what's left of her, I'd slap you into hell, you fucking prick."

In all her rage, she was more beautiful than I remembered. Maybe it was because seeing anything at all looked fantastic at that moment. Maybe it was because I was viewing her through a different pair of eyes, the eyes of her child.

But her words stabbed me. Maybe that's how she earned her nickname.

She stood and deactivated the mag-harness. "The sooner you're out of my hospital, the better."

Love and hate live too close together. I wanted to hurt her, like somehow pushing my guilt and pain onto her would lessen my burden. So, I said, "And the sooner I'm back with my Section, the happier I'll be."

Needles left without another word.

Snowpick watched me watch her go and then cleared his throat. "Bad news, Marv."

"They've desked me, haven't they?"

"The Section's holed up with Golf Company. They're expecting me, but you're not invited."

I shook my head. "Invite me, damn it."

"No can do."

I leaned back and put my arm over my new eyes, blotting out the bright room. They burned a constant, searing pain, reminding me of their foreignness. I had tried to connect with Daxie. Now we were linked, but in death not life.

"I bet they all feel it," I said. "The guys who get patched up." I pulled my arm away and used her eyes to take in the room. "Their friend's heart pumping their own blood, or a chunk of some gal who sat beside them in the canteen. The weight of the constant reminders of two mistakes."

"Maybe," said Snowpick. "Or maybe they just thank the powers above that their warranties haven't expired. A full transplant's grounds for a discharge."

"Yeah, but how many take it?"

"Not enough." He paused, staring at me. "You want her back, don't you?"

"I want them *both*. I should've stopped her."

"Coolies don't do shoulds," he said.

I pointed to my eyes. "This is different. How will I ever look Needles in the eye? Fuck, they aren't even mine to do it with."

"Go after her."

"With all that's happened?"

"Because of it. You two had something once, and you left behind a miracle. Now Daxie's gone and all that's left are those two eyes you're using. If that's not reason enough, then what is?"

"She hates what I do."

He crossed his arms over his chest. "Everyone hates what we do."

"Do you?" I asked.

He wore the face of command, now, and it suited him. He'd make a better sergeant than I ever had. "Someone's gotta do it," he said.

"I know the standard line. I wrote the fucking brochure. 'We save lives, we don't take them.' It doesn't make me feel any better, and it doesn't bring my dead daughter back."

Snowpick shook his head. "You're wrong. *Needles* saves lives. And she deserves a hell of a lot more credit than you or anyone else gives her. Go after her, *now*, or you'll regret it."

I stood and nearly fell back down again. By the time I'd hobbled into the hallway, Needles had disappeared. "Damn."

A doctor in scrubs approached. He looked like a lizard, all scaly at

the edges. The peripheral vision hadn't caught up to my brain, yet.
"Hey, Doc? Have you seen Needles?"

"She's scrubbing into a splenectomy."

"What?" I asked. "You can't be out of spleens?"

"We are. And unless you're willing to donate your own, soldier, I suggest you return to bed."

"I have to see Needles."

The doc yelled a few objections at me, but I ignored him. The walls and floor of the corridor blurred together, making me feel like I was walking along the inside of a pipe. Everything seemed darker and tinted green, as though the army had spiked the camo button, blending the world into their reality. I didn't think about the route—I followed my instincts. I guess the eyes had searched out their mother before.

From the OR gallery I watched Needles. She stood over an open abdomen, resecting skin and calling for suction. I turned on the mic. "Hey, Needles?"

Without looking up, she said, "I'm busy."

"I'm done," I said. "With salving. I'll sign the discharge papers."

That made her look up. "You're serious?"

"Yeah."

The scrub nurse mumbled something about the patient's heart rate. "Can I finish, now?"

"Look for me when you're done."

She didn't answer. I watched her work for a few minutes. Her hands drifted like angels, carefully and skillfully manipulating life back into flesh. Snowpick was right. She saved lives. I was only another scrub nurse passing over organs instead of instruments.

I shuffled back along the hospital corridors, more disoriented than before. I put the odds at less than one in twenty that she'd come after me. But morbid curiosity can be a powerful draw. Or maybe she'd need to hang on to the past.

Back in my room, Snowpick had left a note: *Don't come back. I mean it.*
He always knew what to say.

Under the bed, I found my fatigues. I ditched the gown and suited up, desperate to cling to who I used to be. But part of me had died on that battlefield. Not in glory, like the old war movies. But in disgrace, failing to save the only good thing I'd ever done.

As I headed for the bathroom, I misjudged the distance and

smacked my forehead on the door frame. When I checked to see if I'd sliced myself open, the guy staring from the mirror wasn't me. Green eyes, *Daxie's* eyes, looked out on a man who didn't belong in uniform any longer.

The nurse had left me a razor. I rubbed at the stubble and decided it matched my soon-to-be-unemployed status. I smudged the mirror with my nose, counting my pores. I couldn't make it through a doorway, but my up-close vision had dialled the clock back a couple of decades. My skin was worn, scarred. Living proof of a thousand bad choices.

My breath fogged the glass until all I could see was a blob. I could have been anyone... Daxie... even Needles. I'd spend the rest of my life trying to earn their forgiveness.

"Time to return the uniform," I said to the blob.

I waited for him to answer, to talk me out of it, but he only glared.

I cleared my throat and uttered the two words that had meant the most to me during my stint with the Royal Canadian Regiment. "*Pro patria*." For the first time since donning camos almost twenty years ago it rang hollow. Just another trick to coerce recruits to put their country before their own lives.

I left the nose smudge on the mirror, a souvenir for the next patient, unless the room got scrubbed first. The discharge forms waited at the nursing station. I scrawled my sergeant sig on the solid line.

It should have been dotted, a line like that. The kind that turns a man's war. But final battles never end smoothly. Mine should be no different. •

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SIMURGH

Michael Meyerhofer

Until you've watched the end of the world
three times over, mind your own business.
I made my first nest in the Tree of Knowledge,
relocated when necessary to skyscrapers
then back again, when those too fell disgraced.

I've seen heavens wind themselves to death,
watched them born anew from a single cinder.
Remember that, the next time you feel
inclined to question me carrying off an elephant
or a plane or two in my talons, just for fun.

Imagine the drudgery of three eternities
spent cresting the silver treetops of paradise,
taking notes, dodging ape-eyes then
a silicone spiderweb of weather satellites,
crooning to the distant whalesong of comets.

There are not enough syllables in loneliness.
No meaning to hope, after omniscience.
Now and then, I take human babies, bear them
to my nest and raise them like my own.
I try to forget what I know they'll become. •



Feature Artist Interview: Herman Lau

Lyn X

Herman Lau was born and raised in Edmonton: “*I’m at home with the big Alberta skies and annual temperature dips into the minus forties. I have nothing to complain about really from my childhood here; I was a well-behaved kid, so it was pretty smooth sailing for the most part. I think that kind of stability allowed me to focus on and develop the skills I was passionate about.*”

On Spec: Where does your interest in art stem from?

Herman: I’ve been drawing since I can remember—I was really into cartoons when I was younger, so naturally I would try to imitate the images I saw. I also grew up surrounded by games and stories that gave me a chance to flex my imagination.

On Spec: What is your educational background, and who are your artistic influences?

Herman: It seems like a blur now, but I went through the public school system, and then on to the University of Alberta, where I completed a B.Sc. in Civil Engineering and obtained my P.Eng. designation in a

Above: *Tiger Sketch*: Playing around with lines and an ink marker. I’m thinking I can incorporate this image in a future piece. Sometimes I work piecemeal to bring components together digitally.

straight sprint. I currently work in engineering with a consulting firm called Urban Systems (www.urban-systems.com). We do civil engineering, planning, and landscape architecture to provide a variety of services. I feel lucky to have linked up with this company—its culture is really focused on its people, in helping us achieve our career objectives.

I fit in some art classes through the University and the Art Gallery of Alberta when I could, but it's actually easier to do that now that I'm done school. I'm taking part-time courses through the University's Faculty of Extension Fine Arts program and other drop-in classes around the City when they interest me.

I'm bad with listing artists and artistic influences... Early on, I was mostly trying to emulate the illustrations I saw in gaming books and cards, video game manuals, and comics. Those influences have stayed with me, and I'm amazed to see the evolution of those art forms as



Above: *Art of Evasion*: Costume and posture are what define a character portrait. I got to play with fabric and lighting in this illustration.

hobbies like gaming and comic books have become more mainstream.

From a classical art perspective, I'm always impressed by the detail captured in Renaissance and Baroque period art.

On Spec: Some artists are purists about wanting to 'live their art' (and do) but often find themselves 'starving and unemployable' in the process. Does that have anything to do with why you chose Civil Engineering?

Herman: My mom is an architect, so there were always technical drawings and renderings around in my youth that caught my attention. Since there wasn't an undergrad program for Architecture, it seemed Engineering might be a first step in that direction. Looking back, I realize I was pretty casual with choosing my university path. I just walked into something and persevered with it.

I don't regret arriving at this career choice, as it's given me many opportunities and experiences I wouldn't otherwise have had, but I do wish I had put more of a conscious effort into it when I was younger.

But there is the pressure between having a "real career" and an "art career" that I think all of us with the creative inclination face. On one hand, there is the fear that if I didn't devote myself to the artwork, I'd never reach my potential. And on the other, there's the caution against falling into a "starving artist" stereotype situation.

We're all more than one title, so it's up to each of us to figure out the balance that allows us to pursue all the different aspects of our selves. At this stage of my life, I'm finding that a more stable profession grants me freedom with the type of art I want to do without focusing on the financial aspect, though there never seems to be enough hours in the day.

"I tend to work in a mix of traditional and digital mediums. Most start as pencil sketches and then get finished up using the computer. I've found it to be my favorite combination since it allows me to work tangibly with lines on real paper for the foundation but grants a lot of flexibility during the completion stages. I also work with ink, charcoal, pencil crayon, and various paints from time to time, but usually more for practicing the basic skills than generating complete pieces."

On Spec: How has your ethnic background influenced your art?

Herman: I guess it's granted me access to different perspectives from



my parents and from being Canadian-born Chinese. My father is from China and grew up in Hong Kong. My mother was born in Cambodia and lived in Viet Nam.

Growing up with *wuxia* movies (about heroic martial arts characters, often set in ancient China) was probably the greatest influence on my art and ties into my obsession with all things martial arts-related. When I'm drawing a combative scene, I see it as a choreographed ballet of motion, like I would expect out of a kung fu movie.

The mythologies and ancient histories of my cultural background provide a rich well to draw upon for ideas and archetypes. I try not to limit only to Asian traditions though, as every culture has so much to offer.

My other great passion is studying martial arts. I started when I was

Above: *Back Elbow*: Illustrating a technique I studied from *muay thai*; drawing from what you know and value keeps your art genuine.

eleven or twelve learning *wushu* (kung fu) forms and took up judo in university. From there, I moved on to practice *tai chi* and now train in and help run kickboxing classes. I've found the emphasis on human anatomy and body movement carries over into my artwork. Other than that, I keep busy with some reading, writing, and gaming. Any activities I can do with friends are a plus.

"I don't spend much time categorizing the art I see into anime, comic, or fantasy. I've been influenced by all those styles, so I think it's just about finding the blend that feels right to you. I guess in the past, the easiest way to categorize those styles might have been the country of origin. But the boundaries are a lot blurrier now, since there's so much cross-pollination, which I think is great."

On Spec: How do you see your style of artwork fitting into the greater arts establishment?

Herman: I see myself mostly as an illustrator; the images I produce are meant for visual storytelling and clear-cut communication, whether it's conventional illustrations, concept art, or graphic design. I just want to create eye-catching drawings that I would enjoy viewing myself. I'm not much into obscure symbolism or abstract metaphor. I think as long as your heart is in it, the art can have depth, even without such deliberate statements.

"I'm sure that showing in galleries would be interesting and rewarding, but it's not high on my priority list at the moment. Most of my showings have either been at conventions where I could meet with potential clients or online through websites and message boards."

On Spec: What other projects are you working on right now?

Herman: I've found myself working on a lot of personal projects lately, trying to get my portfolio updated with more current pieces. That's always an ongoing process, as I go through cycles of reaching out to search for freelance work, then closing off to focus on my own creations. I've been producing a series of portraits based on friends of mine, refining my proficiencies with digital painting and capturing likenesses. There's some leads for cover art I'm trying to nail down, and I've been doing some corporate logo work as well. As long as I continue producing art-

work consistently, I feel I'll keep improving my skills and be prepared for the opportunities I come across.

Herman became a volunteer visual art instructor with ArtStart—a program run by Edmonton City Centre Church Corporation (E4C), a charitable human services organization—through his work at Urban Systems. ArtStart provides quality lessons in drama, dance, visual art, and music to elementary-aged kids from low-income families who might not otherwise have access to dedicated arts education. (For more info visit www.e4calberta.org/artstart.html.)

"Working with the kids and seeing what ideas they have to offer has been a worthwhile experience. It's important for them to have a creative outlet. It feels strange for me to be in the position of imparting knowledge to the younger generation, but it definitely forces me to look at things from a different perspective. It gives me a sense of creative continuation and renews my belief in the power of art to transform one's circumstances. ArtStart is gearing up for a large growth in enrollment and some exciting new project ideas, so I'm looking forward to that too." •



Above: *Hespero*: This is a typical creature illustration. I like bats and took a shot at combining different anatomies to form a gothic monster.

We are young, but come from a forgotten generation: the last to be taught in classrooms that had no computers, the last to spread out teen-aged angst through pole-suspended phone-lines.

The Corrections

Jared Young

They were the size of bricks, once, and just as heavy. Cream-coloured plastic, black-rubber antennas, lit-up buttons that played a rising scale of electronic tones. They were used only in blockbuster movies, and only by high-ranking government officials seeking to prevent asteroids from destroying the earth. My sister, who is a decade younger than me, does not remember the long forgotten era in which they did not exist. In her youth they have become as indispensable as kidneys and livers; without them, she would die. The same way the domestication of wheat and barley brought us physically closer, the same way the Gutenberg press helped our intimate thoughts to proliferate, these little things—small enough, now, to be concealed in our closed fists—have corrected the course of history.

My sister knows no other world. She thinks it has always been this way. The evolution of technology travels at such a speed; these tiny mechanical advances, these shrinking microprocessors, they stretch chasms between generations. I've tried to explain it to her, but she doesn't believe me. She says: "So, what did you do when you were out of the house? Use a *pay phone*?"

I might as well be arguing for the flatness of the earth.

With this type of thing, you can only hold out for so long. Soon an inflexible dogma works against you. Hunter-gatherers were slaughtered by weakling societies made strong by iron weapons; oral tradition was

smothered beneath a landslide of printed pages. There comes a point, for the sake of your own survival, that you have to go with the flow.

So: I bought a cell-phone.

When I opened the box it exhaled that new plastic smell that since my childhood has reminded me of brand-new transformer toys still stiff in the joints and difficult to manipulate; after a while, though, my small fingers would learn the twists and turns and I could change them from robots to cars to dinosaurs to robots, all with my eyes closed. It would be the same, I guessed, with this new futuristic thing. I would learn these buttons. I would soon play them like a virtuoso.

I did as the booklet instructed me: charged the phone, installed the tiny card, punched the activation code. And with that—a tiny beep tossed up into the atmosphere, into outer space, bouncing off an orbiting satellite and back down into my ear—I became complicit in the cultural shift.

Power on, activated, the cell-phone rang almost immediately. A computer-chip symphony, like the music from old Nintendo games. On the tiny plasma screen were the words: Unknown Caller. I accepted the call.

“H’yello?”

At the other end was a man with a familiar voice. He asked for me by name, but seemed to have trouble pronouncing it, as if the word got stuck in his throat and was ejected by conscious force of his gag reflex:

“...Jared?”

“Speaking.”

Silence; interference, maybe.

“Hello?” I asked.

The voice faltered again. “Uh... hey.”

More silence.

“Who is this?”

“This, uh... this is no one.”

I’d heard this man’s voice before. It was the voice of a famous actor, someone who narrates TV commercials, an elementary school-teacher whose sluggish baritone was the soundtrack of my school day, a lost childhood friend.

I pretended to recognize whoever it was.

“Oh, hey, what’s up?”

“It’s okay,” the Unknown Caller said. “You don’t have to pretend. You have no idea who I am.”

“No,” I admitted.

"Cool. Listen, uh, this is going to sound totally weird, but just try and follow along."

"Okay."

The Unknown Caller cleared his throat (even that sound—like the transmission of an old car grinding between gears—was familiar to me). "Okay, listen close," he said. "This isn't going to make a lot of sense, but... she's on the right, in the reeds."

I went to the window, looked down the street, to the right.

"Where?"

"That's it. That's all I can tell you. Just try to remember. You can't really see her, but she's in the reeds."

"I can't see anything," I said.

"No, no. It's not, like, an observation. Just a phrase. Memorize it, like a song lyric. She's on the right, in the reeds. On the right, in the reeds. On the right, in the reeds. Etcetera, etcetera. Now you say it."

"What is this?"

"Just do it."

Like a chastised child forced to apologize, I mumbled: "She's on the right, in the reeds."

"See? Was that so hard?"

That familiar tone of admonishment—a sort of loving condescension—drew a loud reaction from my memory. I was sure of it then: I knew him. "Seriously, who is this?"

"What day is it?" he asked suddenly.

"Wednesday."

"No, the date. What's the date?"

"July... something-th. I don't know."

"Okay, okay. So, trust me, you'll know what I'm talking about real soon. Just remember, she's on the right, in the reeds. Say it."

"Listen..."

"Say it, come on."

"She's on the right, in the reeds."

"Again," the Unknown Caller demanded.

"She's on the right, in the reeds. She's on the right, in the reeds."

(Why—I would later wonder—did I submit so easily to his authority?)

"Okay," he said. "Don't forget. Talk to you later."

The phone went dead. No hollow click of the plastic headset tapping the cradle. No beep. Just dead air. The digital readout said: "Call ended."

We are young, but come from a forgotten generation: the last to be taught in classrooms that had no computers, the last to spread our teenage angst through pole-suspended phone-lines. Telephones, in our primitive childhoods, were anchored to the architecture, and we begged our parents to have them installed in our bedrooms; we stretched those spiral cords as far as we could, and then cordless phones appeared, and it seemed that we were suddenly living in the magical future that science-fiction films promised. Cordless phones! Hover-cars were the logical next step! At school, we researched reports in actual books. We wrote on lined paper and stained our fingers blue with the ink of disposable ball-point pens (disposable pens!—what a fantastical luxury they must once have been!). When we left for university, we eagerly traded mailing addresses; I still have some of those letters hidden away: how are things, things are fine, school is okay, school is hard, you wouldn't believe how drunk I was this weekend, see you at Christmas. Handwritten, folded into intricate origami trapezoids, they seem strangely frail, now, relics that belong in a museum.

A few weeks after I received my new phone, I spent the weekend at Walsh Lake with those friends of mine from the old days, the pen and paper days. Trent was there, and Kristen, and Jimmy Crowley. We slept overnight at Matt McIsaac's cabin, and on Sunday afternoon were joined by Matt's older sister, Sarah, and her two kids. While we lay in the sun and baked away our hangovers, the kids played: their thin legs propelled them off the edge of the dock; they spun like turbines beneath the water, keeping their weightless bodies afloat. After a while, the boy, Jeremy, got bored, and sat on the front deck watching a movie on a small electronic device (here, to my surprise, a generation separated from my sister; she will reflect, one day, that she knew a time when movies were watched in theaters, on desktop computers, or even on television: not on these minuscule handheld devices that have flourished in the wake of her childhood). The girl, Jennifer, loitered in the water, near the dock where it was shallow enough for her to stand, and every so often she would pinch her nose and duck beneath the water. When she emerged, she would look up towards the cabin to see if her brother or mother or uncle was watching, and inevitably they were not, so she would duck back down again, disappear from sight. For a while

Trent played with her. He threw an empty beer can into the water and she would doggy-paddle madly after it, carry it back to the dock. When she dropped it at his feet, he'd growl, "Stop it! I'm trying to litter!" and then he'd throw it again.

For lunch we roasted hot dogs over an open fire, ate them with stale buns and soda that had been sitting out all night, which was flat and warm and tasted so much like our syrupy-sweet childhood that the flatness and warmth didn't matter. The kids ate quickly and went back to playing, and my cell-phone, zipped in the pocket of my backpack, chimed to life. I flipped it open (my fingers had memorized this maneuver, among others). It was my sister. She had been using my laptop, and in the middle of some important typed exchange—with a friend, with a boy she liked, with some internet predator on the far side of the world—it had crashed. She couldn't restart it. As I tried to explain the process of resuscitation (which is distinct for every computer: they become finicky, after a time, like spoiled pets), Sarah walked down to the edge of the lake and called out her daughter's name.

"Jenny?"

Into the phone, I said: "...no, stupid, turn it off, and then when it's in the middle of restarting push the reset button."

"Jenny?"

"...it's the tiny button—like, in a little hole—you'll need a pin or something to push it, but you have to push it when it's starting up, not after it's already loaded."

"Jennifer?"

"Because if it's already loaded, you'll reset it and it will do the exact same thing. You have to reset it in the middle of the start-up. Trust me..."

Matt brushed past me and walked around to the far side of the cabin. I could hear him calling out for his niece. Trent, too, had risen from the table. He walked down to the edge of the water and joined Matt's sister.

I hung up—but not really, because there's no cradle, just that silver button that severs the invisible particle stream—and followed the others down to the water. As they disappeared into the tangle of shoreline brush, still calling out the girl's name, I walked to the end of the dock, where earlier she'd been dunking her head beneath the water. It was calm and clear, and the sun was high enough that I could see to the

bottom: smooth stones embedded in nothing-colored silt, aquatic plant life scattered here and there. Nothing else.

From up above Matt's voice called out: "Jenny?"

Kristen, too, was somewhere up above, in the trees: "Jenny?"

And, of course, there was that other voice, that familiar voice, which in my memory had become my own, repeating, repeating, memorizing the phrase like a song lyric. It spoke aloud in my head, like a sudden burst of static through a loudspeaker:

She's on the right, in the reeds.

I turned right and saw only the jutting finger of rock that sloped parallel to the dock and disappeared into the water. But past it, on the far aside, sure enough, there was a patch of reeds jutting from the glassy surface like follicles of fine hair. There was a small ripple, too, as if a fish had just come up to snatch a skating insect. A moment later, a small blond head emerged from the water, and just as quickly it sunk back below. More ripples. And silence.

She was on the right, in the reeds.

In that seizure of realization, the progression of physical and mental commands in my brain became hopelessly jumbled, and as I bent at the knees to jump in, I thought also to call out for help, but the sound that came out of my mouth was not a word, rather a moan, a trilling siren-sound, the midnight death-knell of a loon, and I froze in that bent position, like a swimmer at the gates, moaning, and it occurred to me that I should point to where she was—point to the right, to the reeds—but the locomotive act of lifting my arm interfered with my crouch, and I popped back up to a standing position, and still that weird sound—not quite words, not quite a yell—was spilling out of my mouth. Again, the girl's head popped out of the water, and then her tiny hand. And then she was gone.

All at once, like a compressed spring suddenly freed, my body went loose, I was in the water and above me, carried by the breeze that came up off the lake, was the echo of my call, finally articulated:

"Over here!"

• • •

It was another six months before I heard again from the Unknown Caller. The familiar voice struggled again to spit out my name, a piece of gristle stuck in his teeth and worked loose with his tongue.

"What's up?" he said.

I'd expected the call sooner. In the weeks after I'd pulled the little girl out of the lake, whenever my phone buzzed to life, my stomach would spill into my heels; each time the ring tone echoed from the pocket of my jeans, or from the darkness beneath the bed, or rising up through a heap of dirty laundry, I would flip the phone open and wait for my coughed-up name, wait for an explanation, but they were inevitably Unknown Callers of a different sort—calls from overseas, calls from pay phones, calls from primitive land-line numbers—and I soon forgot that I was briefly touched by some omnipotent force.

The Unknown Caller, though, hadn't forgotten me.

"You there?" he asked.

Six months had provided me with ample time to consider what I might say to him if he ever called again, but the phrases and statements I'd compiled were suddenly gone; his voice was a magnet swept across the hard-disk in my head. "Uhhhh..."

"Good work," he said. "Told you it would be easy to figure out."

His nonchalance annoyed me. "Why don't you just say, hey, the kid's gonna drown, don't let her go in the water?"

"It's not that easy," the Unknown Caller said.

"What's not that easy?"

"It's too much. Too much information. I don't want to ruin things for you. You can't know what's going to happen. You have to figure it out right then and there. In the moment. It has to be, like, your own free will."

Definitely someone I knew; definitely a childhood friend, his voice subtly masked by the few bass notes gained in puberty.

"Hey, man, don't be pissed at me."

"You know, I can barely swim," I said.

"You can swim just fine."

It was true.

"So, what is it this time?

He said: "Buy a bus ticket to Winnipeg."

"Okay..."

I waited.

"...is that a metaphor for something else?"

"No, that's it."

"Am I going to be able to figure it out?"

"Nothing to figure out this time. Just buy a bus ticket, go to

Winnipeg, visit your grandmother.”

“Okay.”

“...and this time, for Christ’s sake, when she says ‘I love you,’ say it back.”

So, though I couldn’t spare the time, though I was forced to compose an intricate series of lies to get a few days off work, I did as I was told: I bought a bus ticket to Winnipeg and visited my grandmother. I stayed with her in the same house where I’d wasted my childhood summers, slept in the same hard bed in the same guest bedroom, and in the mornings, half-awake and staring about, scanned the same bookshelf crowded with the same self-help books and spiritual guides that had intimidated me when I was young: John Hellerman’s *New Path to Spiritual Discovery, Get Organized!: Tips to Turn Your Hectic Lifestyle on its Head, Thoughtful Christianity for Teenagers*. Now, like the horror movies that once gave me nightmares, these books appeared ridiculous, and the bookshelf—which had once seemed Holy, cluttered by all that suggestive theology—seemed instead a parody of something significant, like those massive new churches built with sloping skylights and giant video screens. Books, too; what’s the point of them anymore? I could store the complete works of Shakespeare, Dickens, and Stephen King in the memory card of my small phone; the whole contents of that cluttered bookshelf would occupy a physical space no larger than a quarter. Who needs those bulky paper bricks?

I spent a week in Winnipeg, rolling old coins that smelled like blood, carrying old newspapers to the recycling bin, driving through the city in my grandmother’s old Crown Victoria, picking up milk and bread and dropping off boxes of old clothing at the Salvation Army. In the evenings, over bowls of chicken-broth borscht and cabbage rolls, my grandmother told me, like she always does, the story of when I was three years-old and ran away from home, and she apologized for the time that she spanked me for refusing to vacuum the upstairs hallway. This second event I could not recall, and she was dumbfounded that such a momentous crime could go unnoticed. She said: “You probably shut it out, it was so awful.” I told her it was no big deal, but she apologized anyways, and I accepted.

A week later, back at home, I received a call. Not the Unknown Caller, this time, but my mother. She was calling to tell me that my grandmother had died.

• • •

Two years later, in the middle of the night:

"Quick, what's the date?"

"It's three o'clock in the morning, man..."

"What's the date?"

"I don't know."

"September, right?"

"Yeah."

"Early? Late?"

"Like, the eleventh. Or the tenth."

"You should know if it's the eleventh or the tenth."

"Why?"

"If you don't know, then it's the tenth."

"Sure. Yeah. September tenth."

"You need to make a phone call."

"Okay. To who?"

"I don't know. The police. No, not the police. Someone else. Like the government or something. Department of Foreign Affairs. Can you call them? Or the Department of Defense. There should be a number in the blue pages, right?"

"I don't know. Do they just take calls like that? It's three in the morning, eh?"

"Yeah, I know. I just... totally forgot. Fuck! Listen... call somewhere in New York instead."

"New York?"

"The police, first. Then the mayor's office. Then, I don't know, the fucking national guard or something. Wait, no! I need you to call in a bomb threat. I'll find the number for you. That will totally work."

"I'm not calling in a bomb threat. What the fuck?"

"Here, wait. Let me figure this out. I'll call you back."

I waited up for a few hours, then fell back asleep. The Unknown Caller never called back. I suppose he wasn't able to figure it out. Then again, who could have?

• • •

Another ten months before I heard again from the Unknown Caller. I was living with a girl, and from the modest gains I was able to accumulate in my career as a hotel desk clerk, we were able to carve out a pleasant little nook of urban domesticity: we brought reasonably priced

bottles of wine to dinner parties; we had a framed print of Klimt's *The Kiss* on the wall behind our couch; we signed up for a special package that allowed for unlimited calling between our two phones, and sent text messages to each other from opposite ends of the grocery store.

Cn U gt mlk.

R appls in fridg bad?

Yes gt appls.

Gone were the days when I fumbled over this slick silver device and felt like one of those sad anachronists who preferred typewriters to word processors, who passed off personal computing as a fad, and who—as that fad became a way of life—found themselves hopelessly overwhelmed, eighteenth-century footmen put suddenly behind the wheel of a car, so used to dealing with biological processes that they are unable to comprehend the agility of the electronic pulse; how well it mimics—and improves upon—human physiognomy.

Now I often wondered: how did I ever live without this thing?

When he called, the Unknown Caller said: "This one won't be as obvious. I have to be careful not to screw things up, you know?"

"What do you mean?"

"I can help you out, but I have to be careful. One false move and it's over."

One false move? I thought: who talks like that?

The voice answered: "You're wondering, Who talks like that? I know. Totally melodramatic, right? I just... have to be careful. Trust me."

"I know you. We've met, right? Fuck, I feel like your name is on the tip of my tongue..."

The voice laughed. A familiar giggle (like everything else). "Anyway, here's the next thing. Not totally straightforward. You'll figure it out, though. You're not as smart as you think, but you're smarter than you think. Know what I mean?"

"No."

"Okay, so, listen close... ready?"

"Yeah."

The voice drew a breath, a dramatic pause, then announced: "Avoid gladiators in Brazil."

"Brazil? I'm going to Brazil?"

"Well, I don't know. Just listen. Avoid gladiators in Brazil."

Silence, for a bit.

"Try not to think about it too much," the Unknown Caller said. "Learn the phrase, memorize the words. You'll figure it out. You always do. Avoid gladiators in Brazil."

"Avoid gladiators in Brazil. Is that, like, a euphemism?"

"I don't know. Kind of, I guess. To be honest, I don't really know what a euphemism is."

I smirked, and somehow he heard the curl of my lip.

"...and neither do you, so don't act like you're hot shit."

• • •

Brazil was a dance club in Niagara Falls.

I was there for the weekend with Greg Branch, an old friend from college who—though he'd lost an inch of hair at the peak of his forehead—had managed to retain the square-jawed good-looks that had doomed him, when we were living together in residence, to whoredom. We bar-hopped, we went to strip-clubs, we went to the casino, and while we feigned expertise at the blackjack table, my girlfriend, back at home, sat alone beneath *The Kiss*, and wandered through grocery store aisles with no one to consult about the decaying state of our produce. She called me a few times, left a few text messages, but—here's the dark omen of things to come—I left my cell-phone turned off for the entire weekend.

We went to Brazil with a waitress. She served Greg and I dinner, and between the appetizers and main course was charmed by our (his) easy-going banter (which to me has always seemed awkward, though I suppose those blurry remarks are brought into focus by his throbbing biceps veins). She was meeting some friends later, she told us, and invited us (Greg) to come along. So, after we'd finished our meal, we waited for a while at the bar, and then, at ten o'clock, took a cab to Brazil.

I knew immediately that this was the place. Brazil. And I knew what I had to do. Avoid gladiators in Brazil. But it seemed to me, in my drunken state, that those things were mutually exclusive, and that my mission was not to avoid Brazil, but rather to avoid any gladiators I might encounter there. This questionable logic raised no objections from my conscience, and we spent the night—Greg and I and the harem of blonde girls he had, with no effort, acquired—cuddled together in a booth near the back of the club, slipping out in pairs to cruise the dance floor, to fetch drinks, to smoke on the balcony (after

my third cigarette, I had a terrible thought, but when I checked the package I found that they were called Medallions, not Gladiators). Round after round of shots came our way—Ghostbusters, they were called; Kahlua mixed with Coke—and as all of this was happening, I did the most reprehensible thing that a boyfriend can do: for the entire night I didn't mention once that I was currently attached. I consciously omitted the aspect that—when I wasn't in Niagara Falls, when I wasn't surrounded by cute and curious girls—was the thing by which I defined myself. Such an omission is, in itself, a form of adultery, but in my drunken state it seemed a minor bit of carelessness. Of course, what happened later—after we'd gone back to the waitress's place, after we'd smoke a joint and everyone went to sleep except for the waitress's roommate and I—that was another, more literal form of adultery.

The Unknown Caller was displeased.

"I don't understand. What happened? Brazil! Avoid Brazil."

"It was the gladiators thing. It threw me off."

"How could that throw you off?"

"I figured some asshole would try to pick a fight with me, so I steered clear of all the tough-looking guys. Gladiators, you know? You said yourself it was vague. So I did what you said. I avoided gladiators in Brazil."

"Gladiators!" A familiar cry of exasperation. Surely this was some long-ago authority figure; someone easily frustrated by my idiocy, someone comfortable with scolding me for it.

I defended myself: "Avoid *blondes* in Brazil. That might have been a little more helpful."

Silence.

"So, tell me, if there were no gladiators, how the fuck did you get so drunk?"

"Beer."

"And what else?"

"I don't know. Alcohol. Drinks with alcohol."

"And shots?"

"Yeah, shots."

"What kind of shots?"

"I don't know. Tequila, but I skipped that one. And... this thing called a Ghostbuster."

"A Ghostbuster?"

"Yeah, like the movie."

"A shot of amaretto and peach Schnapps, right? And you drop it into a glass of orange juice?"

Such a drink exists. Amaretto and peach Schnapps, mixed together and dropped in a glass of orange juice, known to my friends and I—and perhaps the wider world, though we had to explain the process whenever we ordered it—as a Gladiator. Two weeks too late, and the infinitesimal moving gears of his riddle finally clicked into place. The room around me seemed to bow outwards with the force of the realization, like the truth—the mistaken name of this ridiculous cocktail drink—was something huge that the world had trouble swallowing. "No," I said. "The thing we had... it was Kahlua and something else, and you drop it in a glass of Coke. Not a gladiator."

Silence.

"You're kidding, right?"

"No, I..."

The line went dead. The Unknown Caller was gone, just like the girl, who had driven away earlier that same week, the framed Klimt sticking out of the trunk of her car. I had made a cuckold of her—this lovely girl whose digital shorthand I had come to know so well, with whom I shared the bond of unlimited calling privileges—and in the horrible, shamefaced wake of it, I realized that I loved her. The Unknown Caller, like everything else, had seen this coming. He called back a few minutes later: "It would have been good with her, you know. That was the last test of your loyalty, and we blew it."

I spat out an excuse: "It was the gladiator thing. And I was drunk."

But not on gladiators, which I suppose was the dilemma.

• • •

The advance of technology is merciless. Bits and bytes are rendered futile the nanosecond they're born, like the whole of a single human life against the black canvas of geological time: just a flash of light, just a burst filament in a light-bulb. My cell-phone—special to me as my first, but increasingly unreliable as the tiny chips inside were scuffed and worn by the invisible waves they channeled—became obsolete. The goal of technological evolution is to shrink our appendages so that we can float through life as limbless torsos; our five senses can experience the world, now, without the cumbersome propeller of physical effort. Imagine if they

didn't exist. Imagine it was something else. Imagine that we still wrote letters, and licked stamps, and waited weeks for our questions to be answered. Imagine that friends still recognized each other in the arcs and angles of one another's handwriting. Imagine that Lumiere's moving pictures had failed to find an audience, and instead the turn of the century ushered in an era of unparalleled perfumery; imagine that we gathered together in dark theaters, closed our eyes, and listened to stories told in smells: epic romance written in the fragrance of sweet vanilla and jasmine; gothic tragedy written in the stink of smelted iron and tanned leather. Small changes, a trajectory knocked astray by a few minuscule degrees, and at the far end of things the miles that separate us from the place we might have been are too many to count.

My new phone is half the size of my old one; slim like the face of a wristwatch, almost the size of a credit card, but able, with only these ten buttons, to perform all the tasks previously delegated to the industrial computing power of home PCs (gigantic adding machines, they were; they filled rooms, they roared like jumbo jets; I passed through elementary school without them, and now, it seems, I will pass through the rest of my life without them; all I need, now, is this diminutive accessory).

The last call I received on my old cell-phone was from the Unknown Caller.

"What now?" I asked.

"Nothing," he said. "Just wanted to say hi."

We had never spoken without the pretext of some vital exchange of information. There was an awkward silence.

"Got a new phone, huh?" the voice said.

"How'd you know?"

"After everything, you're surprised that I know about your new phone?"

"Want my new number?"

"Got it already."

"Of course you do. Stupid question."

The transmission faltered; ambient sound devolving into a pattern of digital burps and belches.

"Hello?"

The Unknown Caller's voice reemerged: "...can't talk long. I'm running low on battery."

"This new one I got, it has this lithium battery that lasts for sixty straight hours. And you can charge it in the sun. Is that nuts, or what?"

A beat. The voice, like the first time it spoke my name aloud, faltered:
“One last thing, okay?”

“Last thing?”

“Keep the old phone. As a souvenir.”

“Hey, man. Wait. You at least have to tell me your name.”

The Unknown Caller whimpered: “Hey, *maaan...*” The mocking tone of an older brother. “Just keep the phone. You’ll figure it out. It’s really not that big a deal.”

“Wait! You have to explain. This is, what? Like, seeing into the future or something, right?”

“Nah. Nothing that exciting.”

“Come on, man.”

“Come on, *maaaaan...*” He laughed. Just like my father; a breathless falsetto crackle, like the sound of fissures opening in thin layers of ice; the same laugh that, for years, I’d been making a conscious effort to mimic. “I’ll see you around, okay?”

“Will you?”

More static. Cosmic dust obscuring the signal. “...not literally. Kind of, though. It’s complicated.”

“Who are you? Please.”

“See you later.”

The line went dead.

Call ended.

2:37:59.

• • •

I did what he told me: I kept the old phone. It was eventually packed away in an old shoe box along with other shrapnel of the electronics revolution; other stuff that, for some reason, I was unable to properly dispose of: old cassette tapes, dead double-A batteries, dead mini-flashlights, dead digital watches, various adapters for various devices that I no longer owned. For the next several decades the shoe box sat in the crawl space beneath my childhood home, and forgotten there among the pipes and cement pilings, survived a flood, a small fire, and the birth of my first child. Twenty-three years later, newly divorced and ruing all those things I wished I’d done differently, I came across the shoe box once again. My old phone, to my surprise, still worked. The battery still held a small charge. Just enough for

three or four calls. And though the memory card, over time, had eroded, a single number remained: my own.

It seemed strange, considering the relative brevity of our contact, that I never once questioned the advice given to me by the Unknown Caller. Maybe because I never took it seriously, wrote it off as a prank, and then, when his prophecy came true—when that tiny hand reached up from the lake—my doubt was immediately deleted. That first time, in the heaving moments after I'd crawled out of the water carrying that cold little body, still unable to account for the last few minutes of my life—as I'd swam faster than I ever had, as I'd held my breath longer than I ever had—I could hear the Unknown Caller's voice echoing in my head, and I decided that it must be The Voice of God. Who, besides God, would care enough to make these corrections?

I dialed my old number. Essentially, the phone was dialing itself, but instead of a busy signal, it began to ring. It sounded faint, faraway; the trilling of a bell in the middle of a sandstorm.

Someone picked up.

“H’yello?”

This kid’s voice, I’d heard it before.

The question occurred to me again: who, besides God, would care enough to make these corrections? Only one person, and he must have thought it was appropriate, all those years ago, that God was speaking to him in his own voice. •

Feature Author Interview: **Jared Young**

Roberta Laurie

Jared Young grew up in Yellowknife, Northwest Territories. After finishing high school, he attended the University of Regina’s Film Studies Program. In the middle of his first year, he dropped out. “I thought, at the age of 18, I’d somehow be able to sell a screenplay for a million dollars,” but as Jared admits, “Things didn’t quite work out like that.”

Two years later, he received a call from a friend, “You should move over here and start a film production company with me.”

‘Over here’ turned out to be Sackville, New Brunswick.

"It's almost a misnomer to say we were a film production company," says Jared. "We were just three dudes with a camera."

• • •

On Spec: What made you decide to get into film?

Jared: I've been a film geek since I was a little kid. My dad was really into movies. I grew up around movies. I've always loved them.

Jared's top five movies:

1. John Carpenter's *The Thing*
2. *Aliens*
3. *Heat* with Robert DeNiro and Al Pacino
4. *Sideways*—"Cause it's about a depressed writer who can't get his book published, and I can relate to that."
5. *The Prestige*

On Spec: How did the film production business go in Sackville?

Jared: There was no YouTube back then, but we were basically doing what people are doing now—making amateurish, zero-budget, short films. It was pretty obvious from the start that the film thing was just for fun, and not something that was going to lead anywhere. During that time, I wrote a bad road-trip novel and started writing equally bad short stories and submitting them to magazines. The rest is history.

Jared Young's writing has appeared in a number of prestigious publications:

- | | | |
|-----------------------|-----------------------------|---------------------------|
| • <i>Maisonneuve</i> | • <i>McSweeney's</i> | • <i>Descant</i> |
| • <i>Grain</i> | • <i>The Fiddlehead</i> | • <i>Pindeldyboz</i> |
| • <i>Word Riot</i> | • <i>The Ottawa Citizen</i> | • <i>The Toronto Star</i> |
| • <i>Joy Magazine</i> | • and now <i>On Spec</i> | |

• • •

Jared works and lives in Ottawa with his wife Emma-Leigh. By day, he is a mild-mannered writer of corporate documents, technical manuals and advertising copy. But at night, Jared lets his imagination take flight. He is currently putting the finishing touches on his new novel, *The Throne*, for which he received a grant from the Canada Council.

Trivia: Jared's grandfather-in-law is Charles Lynch, the renowned World War II correspondent and political journalist.

• • •

On Spec: How long have you been writing?

Jared: Oh since forever. When I was in junior high I was obsessed with Michael Crichton. I used to write airport paperback novels. I'd design the covers with a little picture and my name in massive letters. Writing was something I always did, but I didn't really start thinking about doing it as a career until my late teens, early twenties. That's when I started writing short stories and submitting them to journals and getting feedback.

On Spec: Was there something or someone who inspired you to write?

Jared: My father's a writer. He used to work in radio, but became dissatisfied with it, even though he was really talented. Apparently, he went into a church seeking advice, and asked God, "What should I do?" And he got this idea he should be a writer. So he wrote and wrote. He's written ten or twelve screenplays. None of which have been produced. He won an award for a half-hour children's program he wrote, but it never ended up being produced. So I grew up around the idea of story telling.

My dad's a natural storyteller. He used to record cassette tapes with stories on them for me to listen to. He'd make up these crazy stories about werewolves attacking small towns and the townspeople fighting back and kids being turned into cats by witches. I grew up reading his screenplays. When I was eleven or twelve, I remember taking one of his Robert McKee *How to Write a Screenplay* books and trying to write a vampire screenplay. I only wrote two pages or so before I got bored and gave up. I grew up around that. My dad had his writing room with his typewriter. It smelled like cigarette smoke, and I used to hang out there all summer and type. I'm not sure what I typed, but I liked to type.

On Spec: How would you describe your writing?

Jared: Overly sincere. A little too wordy. Tries too hard. I like to read things that are dense, so that's the stuff I like to write. I don't like to write in short sentences. I enjoy the complexity of putting words together in different ways. And I tend to do it in a really meticulous way.

On Spec: Did you get your start with litmags?

Jared: My first story that was accepted for publication was in *Descant* in 2004. That was a big deal for me because I'd spent a couple years sending stories everywhere and getting rejection letters. Around that same time, I'd gone to the Humber School for Writers. I'd applied to their summer program and received a scholarship. I studied with Nino Ricci, and he was very kind to me. He said some very nice things about what I was doing. That just added more fuel to the fire. It was right around that time that I found out my story was going to be in *Descant*. It was the beginning of my supposed legitimacy.

• • •

Trivia: Jared spent two years in Thailand where he wrote for *The Bangkok Post*.

• • •

On Spec: How has growing up in an isolated community like Yellowknife affected your writing?

Jared: On the one hand it was this really normal suburban childhood. Yellowknife is sort of a microcosm of a big city. There's a skyline, homeless people on the streets. You can squint your eyes and it looks a lot like Toronto. But when you drive outside of town, you're in the middle of nowhere. It's very much a bubble.

Now that I've created more written work, I can look back and see that a lot of what I've done has to do with growing up in Yellowknife. Even the story that's appearing in *On Spec*, it makes reference to Walsh Lake, which is a lake just outside of Yellowknife.

On Spec: Is this your first piece to be published in *On Spec*?

Jared: Yes. It's actually the first sci-fi-ish piece of fiction that I've had published. I was excited. I've read the magazine for a long time. I think I even submitted a story when I was in college. I'd written this story, a bad Stephen King/Dean Koontz kind of thing, about a guy whose car breaks down in the woods, and he gets eaten by a shadow-creature. Surprisingly it never appeared in the pages of the magazine.

On Spec: Do you enjoy writing speculative fiction?

Jared: Oh yeah, I love it. I'm surprised I don't write more of it because my tastes tend to go in that direction. The novel I'm working on has sci-fi elements to it. There's something about being able to bend the rules of reality that heightens the truth of the moment. In reference to *The Corrections* there's this idea that everything is connected. I like the idea of the whole world being interconnected, like lines of dominos stretching out through time and space, and people being able to influence the course of history, even in the smallest of ways. A lot of speculative fiction explores these connections. There's a sort of freedom that you don't have when you're writing in other genres.

On Spec: What was your inspiration for *The Corrections*?

Jared: I'm a really big fan of Jonathan Franzen's *The Corrections*, so I think I just wanted to write a story called *The Corrections*. That's one of the books that I read that really changed my perspective on writing.

Part of it had to do with my younger sister. She's twelve years younger than me (seventeen). She grew up around cell phones. It's a natural part of her life. Until very recently I had never owned a cell phone, and it was very weird having this sibling who was born a decade later than me and grew up in this completely different environment. She's always on her cell phone, always texting people. She's always in constant contact with her friends. I thought it was interesting, the different cultural experiences that we're having.

It was also partly inspired by the fact that I got my first cell phone around the time I started writing the story and didn't know how to use it. It would make noises and I'd get confused and press buttons and it would shut off. It was like this futuristic piece of technology. In that sense, I'm a little bit backwards. Not a big cell phone fan.

• • •

I like lists. I'm a big fan of lists.

• • •

Top five books:

1. *The Professor of Desire* (Philip Roth)
- 1.2. *A Month of Sundays* (John Updike): "I'm just a big John Updike fan. I've read more of his stuff than anyone else."
- 1.3. *The Corrections* (Jonathan Franzen): "The first book that curled my toes."

1.4. *Jurassic Park* (Michael Crichton): "The only book I've read 3 times."

1.5. *Cloud Atlas* by David Mitchell

• • •

On Spec: You also write graphic novels.

Jared: You know how Michael Jordan was a great basketball player, but he always wanted to be a great baseball player? But then it turned out that he really sucked at baseball? That's kind of like me. I write, but my secret second passion is comic book art. I'd love to write or draw comics for a living.

• • •

I've been a huge comic book geek ever since I was a kid.

• • •

In 2006 Jared, along with a friend, founded *Lies With Occasional Truth: The World's Greatest Fiction Magazine*. LWOT is an online zine spoofing the notion of "Canadian Literature." (See it at www.lwot.net)

On Spec: What inspired you to found LWOT?

Jared: A poorly-articulated, fairly indefensible—but very genuine dissatisfaction with the popular concept of "Canadian Literature". It's a common complaint, I think, and I don't have a particularly interesting viewpoint in the debate. I just think that there's a lot more to Canadian writing than what is broadly published and marketed as representative of our national literature. It's not all alcoholic bush-pilots and quirky immigrant families in Toronto/Montreal. Why can't killer lava-robots from Alpha Centauri be representative of a Canadian aesthetic?

• • •

I'm a bit of a loner... a mysterious loner. •

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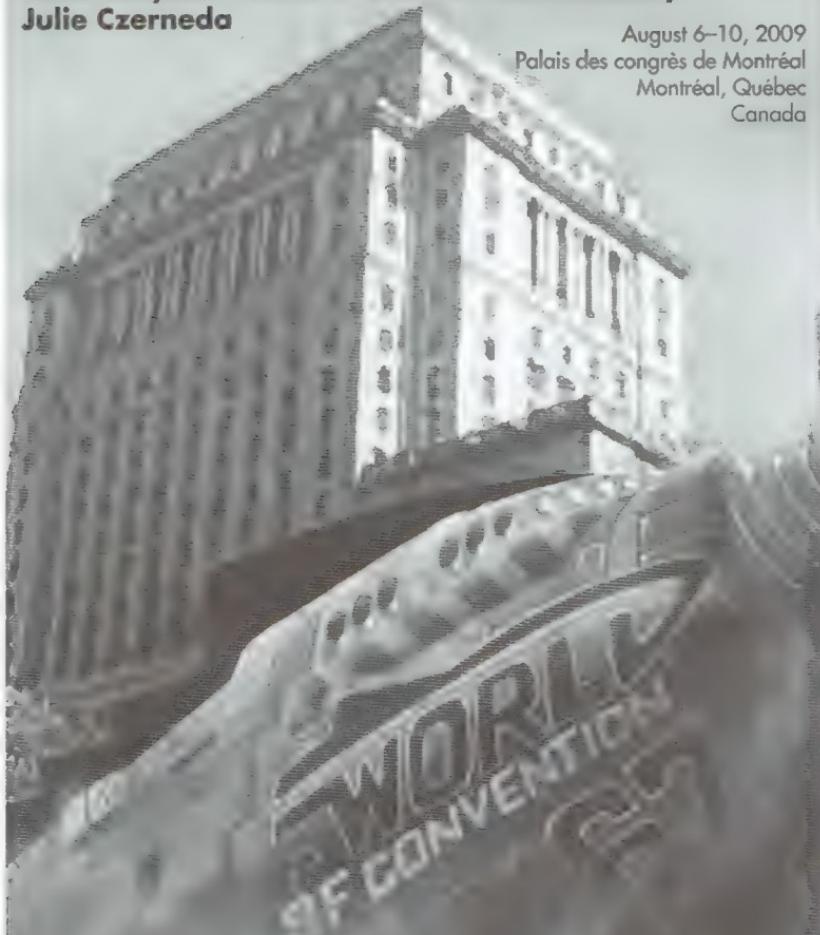
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Suzanne Church: When Suzanne Church isn't chasing characters through other realms, she's hanging with her two children. She is a 2005 graduate of the Clarion South Science Fiction Writers' Workshop. Her short fiction has appeared in *Cicada*, *Neo-Opsis* and *Challenging Destiny* and in several anthologies including *Book of Dead Things* and *Book of Shadows*. She scribbles as canadiansuzanne on *LiveJournal*. Read more at www.suzannechurch.com.

Alexander Curnow lives and writes in Calgary, Alberta. He works the night shift at a small hotel in the city to pay the bills, sleeps by day, and uses most evenings and coffee shops to create short stories and novels. After seven years of solid writing and at 25 years old, there's limitless inspiration and passion to bring you new adventures in the years to come.

Desi Di Nardo is a writer in Toronto whose work has been published in numerous North American journals including *The Literary Review of Canada*, *Descant*, *the Globe and Mail*, *Grain*, *National Post*, *Canadian Woman Studies*, *13th Moon*, and *Rampike*. Desi's poetry has been performed at the National Arts Centre for International Women's Day, featured in Poetry on the Way on the Toronto Transit Commission, selected by Canada's Parliamentary Poet Laureate for "Poems of the Week", and displayed in the Official Residences of Canada. Desi has previously worked as an on-air host/writer and English professor. For more see: www.desidinardo.com

Evan Hazenburg is a student of Mathematics and Linguistics at the University of Ottawa, where he expends a lot of energy trying to convince two competing faculties that his chosen fields of study are not mutually exclusive. Between these abject lessons in futility, he does a little writing and a little studying. This is his first publication.

B.C. Holmes lives in Toronto. Her writing has appeared in *Aboriginal Science Fiction*, *Strange Horizons*, *Challenge Magazine* and others. Her website is at www.bcholmes.org

Ryan Laliberte currently thrives in the suburban outlands of the
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GTA where he completes a History and Classics degree at University of Toronto, doing volunteer work with grade-school kids, and escaping to Europe on a bi-yearly basis. His fiction has previously surfaced in *Neo-Opsis* magazine.

Herman Lau is a freelance artist from Edmonton. His interest in illustration stems from the stories and games he grew up with, mythologies full of movement and characters to inspire his drawn illusions. Accordingly, he finds homes for his artwork in the speculative fiction and gaming industries. Herman was Pure Speculation's 2008 artist guest of honour. More samples of Herman's work can be viewed online at www.spectralcalm.com. Also see our feature interview with Herman in this issue.

Roberta Laurie won her first writing competition when she was 17, and she's been writing ever since. She has been published in three anthologies and is co-editing a fourth, *Snapshots of Stony Plain: A Writers' Landscape*, due to be released this year. Roberta has written for several magazines including *WestWord* and *Yoga Bridge* and volunteers for the literary magazine *Other Voices*. Currently she is writing and researching a book about the challenges facing the women of Malawi and other African countries. You can learn more about Roberta by visiting her website at www.creativewhispers.ca.

Michael Meyerhofer's first full-length collection, *Leaving Iowa*, won the Liam Rector First Book Award from Briery Creek Press. He is also the author of three chapbooks: *Cardboard Urn*, *The Right Madness of Beggars* and *Real Courage*. He was recently the recipient of the James Wright Poetry Award, the Annie Finch Prize and the Laureate Prize. His work has appeared in *Arts & Letters*, *Green Mountains Review*, *Fugue*, *North American Review*, *Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine* and others.

Hannah Strom-Martin is a graduate of the Odyssey Fantasy Writers Workshop. Her short stories have appeared in *Andromeda Spaceways* and the anthology *Amazons: Sexy Tales of Strong Women*. She lives and writes in California with her boyfriend Tony and their three catlike demons: Inara, Arwen and Puff-Puff.

Jon Martin Watts has a PhD in farm animal behaviour. He works as a freelance writer and consultant. *Graveyard Orbit* is his first published work of fiction. Jon lives on a very small farm near Saskatoon, SK. He has a growing flock of sheep, one of whom bears an inspiring resemblance to Isaac Asimov.

Lyn X started out at *On Spec* six years ago as an office grunt, and became Production Editor just over four years ago. She is also the Artistic Director of the Edmonton Small Press Association (ESPA), an independent media and activist-arts organization that annoys the 'arts establishment', advocates for Fair Trade and social justice, and produces the North of Nowhere Expo, a multidisciplinary festival of independent media and underground art. She is also the Managing Editor of the recently-revived *Our Voice Street Newspaper*, an active citizenship project that offers low-income and homeless people an opportunity to build their skills, supplement their meagre incomes and share their stories. She apologizes in advance for any typos.

Jared Young: See our feature interview with Jared in this issue, and also check out his blog at www.jaredyoungwrites.blogspot.com.

in upcoming issues... Great new fiction and poetry by Marissa Lingen, Jack Skillingstead, Elise C. Tobler, Tony Pi, Brent Knowles, Joanna M. Weston, J. Brian Clarke, Karen Keeley, Randy Schroeder and many more.

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